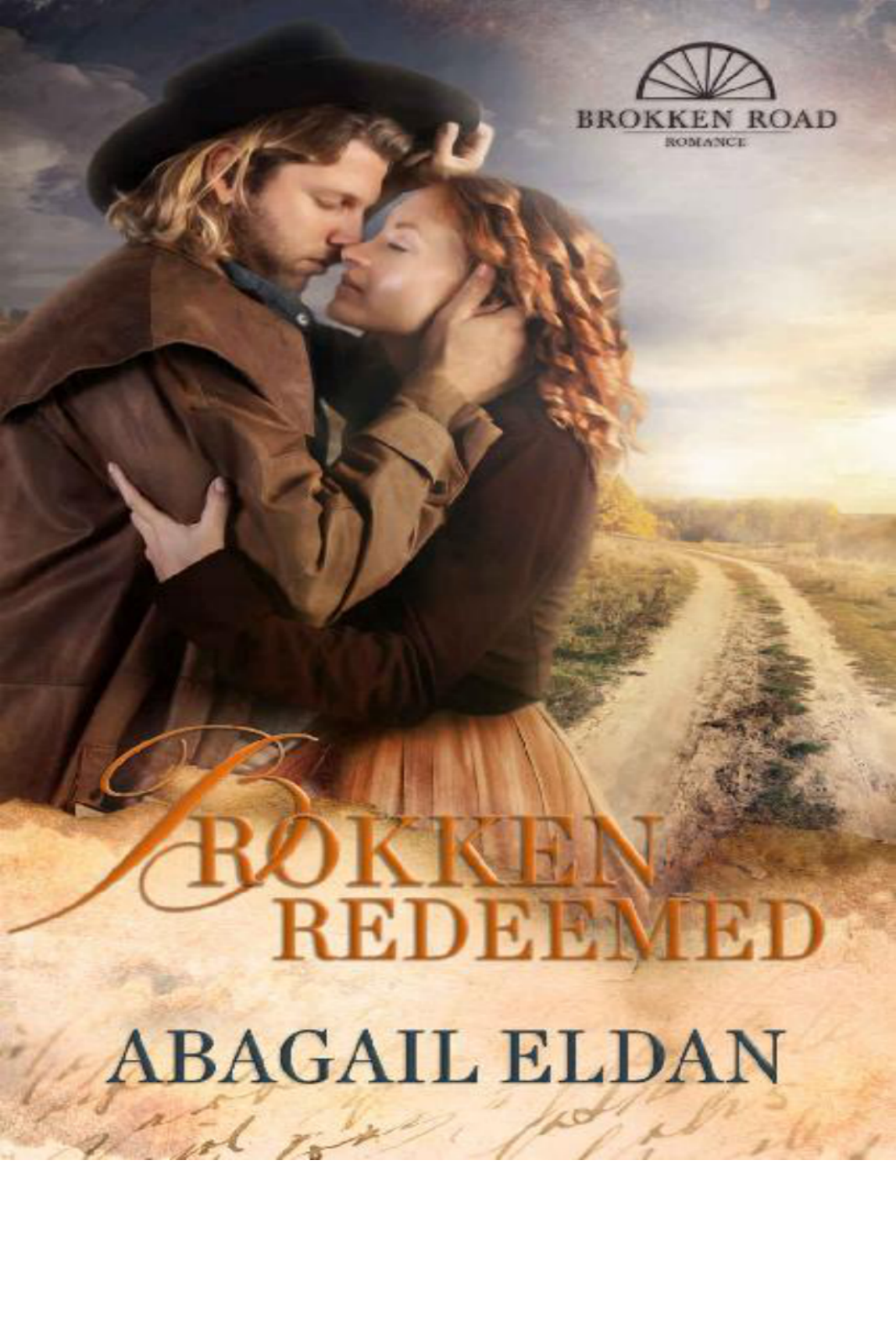




BROKEN ROAD
ROMANCE



BROKEN REDEEMED

ABAGAIL ELDAN

Brokken Redeemed

A Novella

Brokken Road Romances

Book 6

Abigail Eldan

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Scripture taken from the King James Version.

Any discrepancies in the timeline between *Brokken Arrow* and the other novels in *The Brokken Road* series are entirely my doing. Working with several other authors and attempting to keep an unbroken timeline for when characters arrived in our fictional little town in Texas proved to be a challenge. In a few places, that timeline needed to be twisted a bit.

There are also minor characters in this series who appear in several of the stories. As with the timeline, there may be discrepancies in how those minor characters are portrayed from book to book.

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December 1867

The coldness seeped into Chance Hale's bones as it had done four long years ago, when he'd wintered in a field near Nashville. His time with the Union army had been so long ago, and yet he carried it within him wherever he went, forever near, forever present, even as he bedded down the horses.

He'd kept to himself that winter of the War, an outcast, he'd thought. Now, he knew better. The other soldiers had been in awe of him, feared him as some feared a ghost. God's hand had been upon him, and that frightened many folks, even God-fearing ones.

The light of the campfire drew his gaze. Chance shook his head at the foolishness as he bent to tie the hobbles around the legs of the horses. He'd argued with Deborah's pigheaded brother against building a fire, for all the good it'd done. They'd ridden long and hard and needed to leave at first light. They should have been in their bedrolls by now, instead of sitting around a campfire. The sound of Fritz, Deborah, and Klint Caper's voices drifted to him. Who knew how far that sound traveled?

For two men who had fought in the same war he had, they should've known better. This careless—no, reckless—behavior was going to get them killed.

He debated a moment on whether to join the three or head to bed. It was Deborah, more than the warmth of the fire, that drew him. He took a seat across from the three and stretched out his legs. Now that the fire was made, it wouldn't hurt to get warm, even though he needed to keep his guard up. Old habits died hard, and he deliberately settled into a position where he could see the others from the corner of his eye without gazing directly into the fire and losing his night vision.

Deborah was next to her brother on a blanket pulled close to the fire. Her brother and Klint were seated next to her, one on each side, all of them watching the flickering flames.

Chance tamped down his anger, and some other emotion he had difficulty identifying. He pulled up a name for it ... jealousy. He didn't like Deborah sitting so close to Klint. Even now, Klint leaned forward, tilted his head, and flashed his dimples at her. Chance rubbed a toe of his boot into the dirt and crossed his arms, looking in the direction of the horses, although they were hidden behind the trees. His jaw clenched until it ached.

This had been a fool's errand. Why had he allowed Klint to talk

him into this? Before they arrived at their destination, Deborah would be sharing that blue-eyed devil's bedroll. He cast a sideways glance in Deborah's direction.

She leaned against her brother and settled a hand on his arm. "Lydia will be fine, Fritz."

"Lydia said she was not a good horsewoman. What if her horse throws her?" Fritz lifted his head and frowned at Chance, as if somehow it was his fault.

Klint laughed. "She's been around horses her entire life. She was being modest."

Chance couldn't picture the always impeccably dressed Lydia Walsh mucking out a stall, much less riding, but to be fair, she'd gotten the horses ready for them. He frowned at Klint's easy laugh but agreed with him. Surely, she knows how to ride since her family owns the livery.

Fritz turned to look over his sister's head to Klint. "Why would she insist on returning to town?"

Chance almost felt sorry at the despair evident in his voice. Fritz's eyes glittered in the light from the flames of the fire.

Deborah patted her brother's arm. "Lydia gave us a head start, thought she could lead the sheriff on a wild goose chase. It will surely help us."

Fritz met Chance's eyes in a challenge as he wrapped an arm around Deborah's shoulders. "Deborah should have stayed with her."

Chance held Fritz's gaze but did not deign to answer. Yet, his conscience stabbed him. It was his fault Deborah had made the decision to ride with them. He feared what would happen if she returned to town, after breaking them out of jail, but hadn't he put her in more danger by persuading her to accompany them?

Lydia probably had been arrested as soon as she entered town, and her humiliation would have been easier to bear with a friend, with Deborah. And wouldn't being in jail be safer for both? He shrugged. It was too late now, and he hadn't forced Deborah, had he?

No, he'd only made her feel sorry for him, sorry enough to accompany them instead of riding back with Lydia. He'd made progress, learned to forgive himself for what he'd done in the War, and yet, guilt assailed him, ambushed, assaulted him with feelings of worthlessness.

Deborah's tender heart yearned to mend his own, and he'd manipulated that heart by his behavior.

He inhaled deeply and breathed out a sigh. A future with a clean conscience, with a chance at true happiness, hung out of reach, like the fruit above Tantalus, forever taunting him.

Deborah wriggled from her brother's hold. "If you are accusing

Chance of forcing me to come, you could not be more wrong. I did it on my own volition."

Fritz laughed harshly. "So, are you saying if it'd just been Klint and me, you would have joined us?"

"Yes! Curt and Karl are my brothers, too." A stubborn look made her mouth twist upward at one corner.

Skepticism crossed Fritz's face. For once, Chance agreed with Fritz's assessment. If not for him, Deborah would be safely in town, even if under house arrest. Chance moved guiltily. Part of it had been he'd wanted Deborah with him, could not bear to be parted from her. He snorted. He was a lovesick moron.

A movement in the brush caught his eye. He was already on his feet, pulling his knife from its sheath. "Shh..."

"Don't kill them, Chance. It may be someone from town," Deborah pleaded.

He shushed her and moved forward. Even though he'd kept his eyes turned from the direct flames, he found it almost impossible to see. There was no moon, and clouds obscured the stars.

He crept silently, one hand before him, the knife in his other hand by his side, his muscles tensed and ready.

He paused and strained his ears to hear. He startled when Fritz spoke beside him.

"Probably just a rabbit." He'd not bothered to keep his voice down, and Chance shot him a glare that Fritz could not see.

Chance felt, rather than saw, a figure dart past them, heading away from camp, in the direction of the horses.

He ran, not after the figure, but toward the horses, to stop whoever it was from stealing them. "Get the rifle," he whispered harshly to Klint, over his shoulder.

As he approached, the horses stamped their feet and neighed softly. Whoever or whatever Chance had seen was not in the vicinity. Klint, rifle in his hands, came panting up beside him.

"Where are they?" he whispered.

Chance shrugged and realized Klint probably couldn't see him. "I don't know about 'they.' I only saw one."

"Where did he go?" Klint was now fully alert, his gaze darting around.

"No idea. You go that way, and I'll check over here." He pointed to his left, and Klint gave a short nod and obeyed.

After a few minutes, Chance called off the search. They were wasting precious time. Whoever it had been may have left to bring back reinforcements.

He called Klint over. "Help me saddle the horses."

"What? We're leaving?" It was too dark to see Klint's face, to read

his expression.

Chance was tired and wished he could ignore whoever it had been but knew from experience that would be unwise. "What other choice do we have?"

He'd already bent to remove the ropes from one of the horse's legs. His eyes had acclimated to the dark, or perhaps some of the clouds had dispersed, to allow more stars to appear overhead, affording him greater light. His gaze swept the area. Nothing seemed amiss. What if he'd imagined the figure? Or what if it had been a rabbit? No, whatever it was, it'd been large, upright, not an animal.

Besides, the horses' ears were pricked, perhaps from an outsider's presence. Just as likely, it was from Chance's actions.

Klint grumbled a bit, but they got the horses saddled and went back toward the campsite and the fire. Deborah and Fritz were nowhere to be seen. For a moment, his heart beat a harsh tattoo at the base of his throat until the brother and sister emerged from the brush.

Deborah came up to him and placed a hand on his arm. "We've looked around and didn't see anyone."

Fritz frowned at him. "Why are the horses saddled?"

Klint answered for him. "Chance thinks we need to leave."

Fritz's frown deepened. "That's nonsense. We have to get some sleep, or we'll be dead tired tomorrow."

"Someone was in the brush. Could have been the Andrews Gang. I heard they were in the area." Chance spoke softly and dipped his head. He did not wish to frighten Deborah.

"Last I heard, they were down near the Mexican line. Besides, I saw no one," Fritz said, his voice a growl.

Klint's eyes crinkled, as if amused. "You're here now, Fritz. Why couldn't they be, too? We don't want to get entangled with them. They'd as soon kill you as look at you."

Fritz snorted. "The Andrews Gang? Why would they be here? Chance saw no one—just his imagination running wild."

Maybe it was Fritz's doubt that strengthened his belief, but Chance was now certain someone had scouted the camp.

"Let's unsaddle the horses," Fritz said, giving a nod to Klint.

Klint hesitated and looked from one to the other. Deborah, casting a glance at Chance, moved away to stand by her brother.

Fritz moved forward to take the reins from Klint's hands and then uncinched the saddle.

Deborah tilted her head toward Chance. "I'm too tired to think straight. All the stress we've been through. I'm sure your imagination played tricks on you, Chance."

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," Fritz said firmly and pulled the saddle from his horse.

A muscle in Chance's jaw twitched and made him aware that he clenched his teeth. He looked from Fritz to Deborah. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

"Deborah?" He kept his voice strong and firm yet questioning.

"Yes?" In the darkness, her chin tilted.

Dang it. She was going to make him say it. "I'm leaving. Are you coming with me?"

Instead of answering, she looked to Fritz. "Will you come with us, Fritz?"

"Go, but I'm staying here. I need to rest." He held Lucky's reins. Lucky, the horse Deborah had chosen for Lydia's sister to train, shook his head and gave a snort.

Chance fiddled with the reins he still held. His muscles were so tense, he ached. "*Deborah.*" This time it was not a question but a challenge.

"I can't leave Fritz. He's the one in charge." Her voice also had strengthened with resolve.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. As far as he knew, they could be surrounded. "I'm not staying. I can't when there was someone watching us, may still be watching."

Deborah's shoulders stiffened, and her glance traveled to each man in turn. "Did anyone else see anything?"

"There was no one. I'm sure of it." Fritz's gaze met Chance's again, the challenging evident, even in the darkness, with only the campfire providing enough light to see.

He was not going to allow Fritz's pigheadedness to get them killed. "We need to go, and we need to go now."

Klint stepped forward, as if to keep the peace. "What if we took turns on guard?"

Chance was beyond angry. "Do what you want. I'm leaving. Come with me, if you want or stay." His words were for Deborah, but she did not answer.

Klint spoke instead. "You and I can ride ahead, Chance. Deborah and Fritz can catch up with us, or we'll double back."

Chance's only answer was to walk forward, leading his horse away from them.

Deborah called out. "Wait."

He stopped but did not turn. She came beside him and placed a hand on his arm.

He licked his lips, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke, husky with hurt. "We need to leave, Deborah."

"But can't we set up guard, like Klint said?" She was close enough that he could see tears stood in her eyes.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. Their

bodies melded as one. His lips found her warm ones, and he kissed her. His arms tightened around her, and his kiss intensified, until Fritz made a scoff and brought him to his senses.

Deborah's breathing was ragged when he released her. "Chance. Please." She took a wavering step back and held out her hands in a plea. "Don't go."

He forced himself forward, away from Deborah, and fought to control the emotions swirling through him.

All he knew was he couldn't stay. He mounted his horse, and his hands shook but he willed them to still. Tears pricked the back of his eyes, but what could he do? They were all going to be killed in their sleep if they didn't go. Deborah moved up beside his horse, her face upturned.

His heart twisted, almost from his chest. "Come with me," he pleaded.

She shook her head. "I can't leave Fritz. He said he won't go even if I do. Please understand."

Without answering, he urged the horse forward, forcing Deborah back. As soon as he dared, he dug his heels into the horse's sides. The cold wind grew colder as he galloped away, piercing his lungs, and he pulled up his bandana to help filter the coldness.

After a few minutes, he reined the horse to a trot. His heart had grown jagged edges, sending pangs through him. How could one woman affect him so? And how could he have left her in danger?

He had no idea what lay ahead, and there was no need in riding pell-mell into the unknown. He slowed the horse to a walk. The clouds had dispersed enough to allow dim starlight to filter through.

He rode about half an hour when Klint caught up with him. "You're a fool, Chance Hale."

"Why?" Chance didn't look in Klint's direction.

"You should have waited for me. What if you'd ridden toward the sheriff? Or stumbled upon the Andrews Gang? Alone? We don't know who that was spying on us."

Chance's shoulders relaxed. At least Klint believed he'd seen someone. They rode along in silence, heading south, as far as Chance could judge. The stars played hide and seek with the clouds, more often hidden than not, leaving him confused. He wished daylight would arrive to give him a better idea.

At least Klint's arrival had slowed his heartbeat to normal, although his fear did not abate. As soon as it was daylight, they'd circle back and make sure Deborah and Fritz were safe. He berated himself for leaving her, but they'd be reunited soon. He comforted himself with the thought.

The clouds completely obscured the stars, and darkness stretched

before them, as if they rode into black velvet. Only this velvet was freezing cold. He reminded himself he'd been in colder places, much colder. Maybe it was the fear within that made the coldness penetrate so deeply. The fear of losing Deborah? That could not, would not happen.

Klint was unusually quiet. Perhaps he was worried, too. Chance longed for the rising of the sun, prayed for it, but it did not materialize. It was as if time stood still. He'd almost given up hope when the thin rays of the morning's light shone directly ahead of them.

But it did not cheer him for it showed they were heading in the wrong direction.

Deborah had watched Chance ride away into the dark. For a moment, numbness kept her confined to the spot. No not numbness. Numbness would have been preferable to the pain that racked her body. Her very being ached with an emotion she could not name. Klint, after speaking softly to Fritz, had followed Chance. When the sounds of the horses' hooves faded away, she moved back toward the campfire, although the wood had burned down and offered little warmth. She did not sit but remained standing.

Fritz retrieved the small spade from his saddle and threw dirt over the embers, snuffing out the last bit of light. She had no knowledge of how much time elapsed before she realized she shivered with cold.

"We're going to freeze," she said, to her brother's back.

His stiffened stance radiated his anger. Toward her? For kissing Chance? Anger welled up within her aimed back at him. Why had he been so unwilling to ride away with Chance and Klint? Emotions poured forth from her as if a dam had broken, overwhelming, soaring, circling, tightening the muscles in her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

When she spoke, her voice was but a croak. "We need to go after them."

When Fritz did not respond, she made her way to her bedroll and climbed in, pulling the blankets tight before releasing one arm to pull the canvas above her chin. She wrapped her arms around her, not only as protection from the cold, but to keep the anger from spilling out. She'd never been so furious in her life, not even when she'd discovered her brothers had robbed the Brokken Bank.

She breathed deeply and tried to remember Isaac's teachings. There were a lot of verses in the Bible about anger, and with her penchant for impertinence, as her grandmother called it, she'd memorized many of them, mostly against her will. She searched her mind for an appropriate verse, and the only one that came to mind was from Ecclesiastes. "Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools."

And she was a little angry at Chance. He had abandoned her, left her. No one else had seen anything, even after they searched. He should have stayed, or she should have gone with him. No, she couldn't have gone, not after that kiss. She touched her lips. He'd never kissed her with such... passion.

For him to kiss her like that, in front of Fritz and Klint, even if it

had been dark, was scandalous. Her cheeks burned, and her breathing became ragged as she remembered the feel of him against her.

Her feelings for him were too strong, too strong to be alone with him. She closed her eyes tightly. He said he'd be back tomorrow. Couldn't she bear to be apart from him for only one day—less than a day, more than likely?

Maybe she should have gone instead of lying there in misery. Marriage was simply a commitment, and she was committed to him, mind and soul. They should have thought before leaving Brokken and had Preacher Grisson marry them.

If they were married, she could be with him instead of being left behind with Fritz. But her brother needed her, not only because of Karl and Curt, but for comfort. He'd left Lydia behind and was heartbroken. She understood, now, more than ever.

She opened her eyes and peered in the direction she'd last seen her brother. By the dim light of the stars, she made out his form. He sat near the darkened campfire, his shoulders hunched. He propped on something ... his rifle. Maybe he did believe Chance and had decided to keep watch.

She closed her eyes again, able to relax her stiff muscles. Her worries eased, and she tried to sleep, but the ground was uncomfortable. Tiny rocks poked in her back. She rolled to her side and finally dozed.

It seemed only a few minutes had passed when a hand shook her awake. She startled and sat upright, confused for a moment, until Fritz's face came into view.

"What?" she managed to say before he pressed the back of his hand against her mouth.

"We're leaving."

She took the cue from his soft whisper and nodded, not sure if he could see her. It was darker than it had been when she'd dozed off. Without making a sound, she rose and rolled up her bedroll.

Fritz already had their horses saddled. It wasn't until they ridden far away from the camp that he spoke. "Chance was right. Someone was at our camp."

"Did you see who it was?"

He shook his head. "I'll be glad when the sun comes up. No moon and the clouds are blocking out the stars."

They rode on in silence. The hair on Deborah's neck stood on end, and the prickling continued down her back. Someone might be following them, watching from behind, and it was too dark to know.

Her face burned in the cold wind, distracting her. To be riding in the darkness, in December, in the coldest part of the night, was not all bad. The discomfort distracted her from worry. All she could think of

was getting out of the cold. She hunched forward, close to the horse's neck, for a bit more warmth.

Deborah was half frozen when the graying of the day arrived. The cold did not dispel, even when the sun made an appearance. Its thin rays wavered in the frigid air, as if the cold was too much for even it. This was the coldest Deborah had ever been in her life, although she'd never been out riding at night in the middle of December.

Fritz pulled his horse to a stop, and Deborah stopped beside him. He took his hat from his head and wiped his brow, although it was too cold for him to be sweating.

He cast a glance in her direction as he settled his hat back on his head. "We're going back."

"Back? To Brokken?"

"No. To the campsite. I want to see if I can pick up the track of whoever it was spying on us."

"But Karl and Curt ..."

He swung an arm in the air. "We'll never make it to Mexico if we're bushwhacked."

Deborah nodded although she remained uneasy about retracing their steps. The time wasted tracking down a drifter could be used to get them closer to her brothers. *And Chance*, her mind whispered, but she pushed the thought aside. Chance knew where she was. He'd find her if his will was as strong as his want.

Fritz led the way, and Deborah followed. The air did not grow any warmer, and she shivered until Fritz stopped and pulled out his own blanket for her to wrap around her shoulders. Deborah wasn't hungry, but Fritz urged her to eat a few bites and to drink from her canteen before they continued.

They arrived back at the area near the campsite. Fritz did not go directly to where they'd camped but circled around, looking at the ground. Deborah did the same, her gaze sweeping the area, looking for any sign of life. After a few moments, she spotted half a hoofprint and called to Fritz. He swung off his horse and dropped the reins, approaching slowly as he inspected the print, and then he moved farther away.

After a few minutes, as if he was satisfied, he gave a short nod when he returned to Deborah. "Someone else has been here."

"Are you sure it wasn't Klint or Chance's horse?"

"I'm sure. This horse is headed toward Brokken. There are more tracks over here, and someone was leading the horse, walking ahead. It's a small footprint, but whoever it was wore boots."

"What do we do?" She patted her horse's neck and spoke softly to calm her.

"I'm not sure. Follow the tracks seems our best bet." He took his

thumb and pushed his hat back to peer up into her face.

"If we follow the tracks, we'll be heading toward the sheriff. And what if it was a scout from her?"

Fritz took off his hat to wipe his forehead again and then settled it back in place, pulled low over his eyes. "I haven't been entirely truthful with you."

She frowned, and it felt as if an invisible hand squeezed her heart. He'd lied. She'd lied. They had all lied. Somehow, she thought the lying was done with. She steeled herself. "What do you mean?" Her voice was as chilly as the air.

"Benito Juárez's men captured father and ..."

Her mind could not comprehend what he said, and she held up a hand to stop his words. "Father died in the War," she said flatly.

"No, Deborah. Our father behaved in a way some might consider dishonorable—he deserted the Confederacy at the eleventh hour. Many Confederate soldiers, afraid of punishment from the Unionists, fled to Mexico at that time, lured there by promises of resettlement by Emperor Maximilian. Father was one of the Confederate officers summoned directly, and he took a stash of weapons with him."

"Father stole weapons?"

Fritz frowned and shook his head. "I wouldn't say that. The War was over. The Unionists would have confiscated the weapons and sold them to President Juárez."

"So, Father is still there, in Mexico?" Her heart beat wildly in her chest at the thought of seeing her father again.

He shook his head slowly, sadly. "No. Maximilian was executed by a firing squad in June of this year."

Deborah gasped. With all the marriages and her own courtship with Chance, she'd had little time to pay attention to the news. "And what of Father? Why did he keep this secret?"

"He was caught in another war and didn't know how long he'd be there. He was afraid it would distress you to know he went to Mexico instead of returning home."

"But for y'all to keep it from me, to tell me he had died in the War..."

Fritz held up a hand. "No one ever said he'd died—it was an assumption you made. We never corrected that assumption."

Deborah digested what he had told her. "And where is he now?"

"He was imprisoned... I do not wish to distress you." His forehead creased, and he looked away.

"No, please continue. No more lies." She pulled the blanket tighter around her.

His voice broke when he spoke, and his face remained averted. "Father was tortured. Juárez's men knew he had sold weapons to

Maximilian and wanted the gold he'd been paid."

"Why?" But as she asked the question, she knew. "Father had hidden it? And they were trying to find out where?"

"No, not Father. Karl. Karl had been in Father's regiment and went with him to Mexico but didn't stay. Karl returned to Brokken alone, with the gold."

Fear choked her, and she could only nod for him to continue.

"As I said, Juárez's men tortured Father until he told them—I'm not sure what. We knew of this, had contacts from Maximilian's men who had not been captured—well, Karl did. I tried to stay out of the whole affair, until one day, an emissary from Juárez came into the bank. We had to make a decision, and so we did. We traveled to Mexico with the emissary."

"One of Juárez's men came to Brokken?" Her head swirled with this information.

Fritz's shoulders slumped. "Yes, but we had already hidden the gold. We were afraid they'd simply take the gold and kill us if we arrived with it. When we tried to negotiate, they demanded more than double what we had hidden—even with the money from the town, it was not enough. They kept Curt and Karl as hostages and sent me to Brokken for the gold they demanded."

"What happened to Father?"

"He had already died from the torture." He passed a hand over his eyes and reached blindly for his sister's hand. She leaned to the side to take it.

After a moment, Fritz spoke again. "So, you see, the man who was here could have been one of Juárez's men."

Deborah's heart leapt to her throat. "Here? This close to Brokken."

Fritz shrugged. "I didn't think they would follow me but maybe they did."

Her heart drummed in her chest. Deborah shivered, more from the thought of the men who had killed her father than the cold. "Isn't that all the more reason we need to find Klint and Chance first? What if it's more than one man?"

Fritz nodded, his eyes unfocused, as if lost in thought. He released her hand and moved away to search a few more moments before mounting and pulling his horse alongside of hers.

"I'm unsure of the best course of action." Lines of puzzlement crossed his forehead.

"How many men do you think may have followed you?" she asked.

"I don't know. Surely only a few, but I don't understand why they would." He shrugged.

"Perhaps they thought you would not return with the gold. Shouldn't we be going?" Her voice sounded very prim as if her brother

had become a stranger. He had. All three of her brothers and even her father, God rest his soul. They'd kept her father's whereabouts a secret, planned a course of action, carried it out, and had never confided in her.

Fritz frowned at her. "In which direction do you think?"

Fritz seemed incapable of making a decision. She puckered her brow, resentful for a moment. She should not have this burden thrust upon her.

How could she turn away from Chance, the man she loved, when he waited for her? But what if this man was scouting for Juárez's men? Or for the Andrews Gang? She sighed deeply. "We'll follow the man's tracks and find out who he is. Do you agree?"

"Yes, that is the course of action I would suggest."

"But I have one more question..."

"What?"

"When you stole the town's money..."

Fritz held up a hand, grinned, and for a minute, looked like the young brother who'd gone off to War. "That's just it. We didn't."

Chance and Klint arrived back to the camp after mid-day. The clouds had obscured the sun all day, although it had yet to rain. As cold as it was, Chance would not have been surprised to see snowflakes.

They dismounted and left the horses near a clump of trees and approached the place they'd left last night. Only last night? The hours of misery made it seem much longer. The ashes were cold, although that was not a surprise.

"What are you searching for? Don't you believe Fritz and Deborah kept to the original plan and headed south? We should be able to catch them if we push the horses," Klint said.

"We're here. We may as well have a look around." As much as he wanted to race off in search of Deborah, Chance had to consider all possibilities.

He did not confide in Klint his doubts that had grown as they rode back toward the camp. He'd almost convinced himself that the person he'd seen had not been a person at all, but a cougar. It had only been a perception, nothing more than a shimmer, a shadow, that had flitted across his line of sight.

But if it had been a person... He could not bear to think what might have happened after he'd galloped away. As much as he disliked Fritz, though, the man was perfectly capable of defending himself and Deborah. Worry should not gnaw him so.

He searched carefully until he found something, a partial hoofprint. Other prints were visible and immediately recognizable as belonging to Deb and Fritz's horses. Each horse had shoes of different sizes, different imperfections, easily identifiable if one knew what to look for.

He called Klint over, and they followed the prints farther from camp, noting the direction Deborah and her brother had taken—north, toward Brokken.

Klint frowned at him. "Why would they head that way? They're going straight toward the sheriff."

"Your guess is as good as mine. But it looks as if they were on the man's trail."

"But why? I see two other choices for our mysterious visitor, besides Juárez's man or a member of the Andrews Gang. It could be someone Vic, I mean Sheriff Vic, sent looking for us or maybe a drifter. Going back is too dangerous. We're trying to get away from

the sheriff, not ride to meet her.”

Klint was right. It didn't make sense. Unless Fritz knew more than he was telling. He shrugged. “The question before us is what action should we pursue? If it was the sheriff's man, we'd be riding to meet her and her posse. We need to decide if we want to follow Deb and Fritz.” But Chance had already made up his mind.

“That's not a viable option if you want my opinion,” Klint said.

The answer gave him some comfort—Klint cared more for his own skin than he did for Deborah. He cast Klint a sideways glance. “So, let Fritz and his sister face the sheriff alone?”

“I suppose we must consider your sweetheart and her brother, after all we've been through. We can't leave them hanging out to dry.” Despite his solemn words, Klint's eyes sparkled.

Chance frowned at him, remembering the first time he'd seen Klint, on the train, sitting across from Deborah who had seemed attracted to him.

Chance cocked his head. Never had he caught Klint in a bad mood. Surely, any woman in her right mind would prefer someone with a pleasant demeanor—not someone like him who often found it difficult to smile at a joke, much less laugh.

But it seemed Deborah accepted Chance as he was—at least for now. Marriage, children, would bring a new set of challenges. Eventually, she'd tire of his sullen ways, and what then? He desired to change, longed to please Deborah. He pushed his hat back to get a closer look at the man who was his rival, if only in his own mind. “What's your secret, Klint?”

Klint's eyebrows rose. “What secret?”

“Nothing seems to bother you.”

Klint's blue eyes narrowed, became serious. “Have you heard of Epictetus?”

“The Greek philosopher?” Chance hadn't had much schooling, but he loved to read, had read during the War since he found himself alone most of the time.

“Yes. His teachings were to accept whatever happens with calm, to not kick against the pricks.”

Chance frowned. “Kick against the pricks? That's from the Bible, isn't it?”

“Yes, but it was also a Greek proverb. Kicking against the pricks gets you nowhere. Circumstances we cannot change, we must accept. Otherwise, we get stuck and can't move forward. We'd be like a blind hog. We might find an acorn once in a while, but only by accident.”

For a moment, Chance contemplated Klint's words and then snorted. “Greek philosophy, Bible verses, and cowboy sayings. Quite a collection you got there.”

Klint laughed, and for a moment, Chance forgot his envy of this man. It was true Klint flirted with Deborah, but that was his way, his nature. Deborah paid little heed to Klint, at least, as far as Chance knew.

Klint laughed until tears streamed down his face. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. "I was the son of a plantation owner and had a..." His face drew serious although the corners of his mouth tilted up as if he wanted to smile. "... a classical education."

"Oh?" Chance had never been curious about Klint, too caught up in his own problems, and when he'd come to terms with that, too caught up with Deborah. His heart constricted. He had to find her, as quickly as possible. "We need to get going."

"Daylight's wasting," Klint agreed. "But listen. I learned a bit of Latin, a phrase—*Amor fati*. It means love fate, whatever happens, no matter how bad. And that leads me to a request."

Chance's mouth gaped open, and he snapped it shut. How could anyone love the bad that befell them?

Chance was done talking and replied irritably. "What?"

"Let's eat lunch. Get your rifle and shoot us a rabbit."

Chance gritted his teeth. "I am not touching the rifle."

He'd yet to break the vow, made the day the War ended. He'd sold his rifle, as soon as he could, and had never touched another.

Klint's face remained calm. "Accept what happened to you. Everything happens for a reason."

"Nope. I'm kicking. Maybe I need to let the pricks pierce deeper, torment me for all I've done. It's what I deserve." Tears stung the back of his eyes, and he turned away to blink and swallow.

Klint ignored his words. "At least hold the rifle and walk with me into the woods over there. I'll get our dinner if you can't."

Chance hesitated. Klint didn't wait for his answer but pulled the rifle from Chance's scabbard and thrust it into Chance's unwilling arms, pressing it against him.

Chance struggled against Klint for a moment and then sighed. It wasn't worth it. Carrying the rifle didn't mean anything. "I'll carry it, but I'm not shooting anything."

"Fine." Klint headed for the woods, his rifle held loosely in one hand.

After a moment, Chance did the same, and surprisingly, the rifle felt right, comforting in his hand, as he followed after Klint. A chilled wind blew, and the dried leaves, not yet fallen from the trees, although browned and withered, made a shushing sound, as if warning them to tread quietly. In but a few minutes, Klint shot a rabbit. Chance's sharp eyes had seen it before Klint although he had not raised the rifle nor even tightened his hand.

He'd been carrying a rifle since a young'un, since his brother had taught him to hunt, the very brother he'd shot in the War.

He marched back to his horse and shoved the rifle into the scabbard with such force, the horse spooked. He said a few calming words. By the time he turned around, Klint already had a fire going and was skinning the rabbit.

Klint grinned at him. "Good thing the sheriff didn't know about your aversion to the rifle, or she would never have believed your story about us hunting quail."

"She did know, and she didn't believe me, did she?" He'd lied for nothing.

Klint shrugged, and his gaze went back to the rabbit, and he continued dressing it, speaking to Chance without looking up. "No, she didn't. You're right."

Chance didn't offer to help. Dressing a rabbit was a one-person job. Instead, he took a seat on a log and fed wood to the fire. He watched the flames shooting up for a moment. "Thank you, Klint."

"For what?"

Chance kept his gaze on the flames. "For trying to help, although you need to quit your interfering. I can't change."

"Do you wish to change?"

"Yes, but it can't, won't happen. It's too late." He shot Klint a glance, to watch his reaction.

Klint snorted and then skewered the rabbit and positioned it above the fire. "You have your whole life ahead of you. What are you? Twenty?"

Chance laughed. "That means I would have gone off to war at fourteen."

"Many Rebs did. We were short on men by the end, at least."

"I was seventeen when I joined up, although that was still young. I was still wet behind the ears."

"A young man of twenty-three. I'm an old man of twenty-six." Klint sighed deeply. "I'm getting older and older, and marriage appears out of the question for me."

It was Chance's turn to laugh. "I'm sure you wouldn't have a problem finding a wife."

"You would be wrong. None of the Brokken women are susceptible to my charms."

Although only a few minutes ago, he'd convinced himself Deborah had no interest in Klint, Chance bristled at the words. "You mean Deborah?"

Klint held up a hand. "Settle down. I mean the women of the town, not the young woman with the surname Brokken."

Chance had half risen from his seat. He sank back, his anger

subsiding to be replaced with embarrassment. "Sorry."

"It bothers you that I'm friendly with Deborah? That we work together?" Klint tilted his head to peer at him.

Chance didn't answer. The flames drew his gaze again. He was not going to admit his jealousy to this man. Klint would only lie anyway, if he did plan to woo Deborah away.

"You're a fool," Klint said softly.

Maybe he was. But what made him think Deborah could care for him, would remain loyal? Everyone in his life had betrayed him, everyone, including Paul. Why had Paul joined the Confederacy? He'd put himself in danger, put himself in Chance's line of fire.

Still, it was his fault. War was hell and to redeem himself from his crime was an impossibility.

"Eat up," Klint commanded. "We need to get going."

But Chance had lost his appetite. Love was hell, too.

Deborah kept casting a glance back over her shoulder. She wasn't sure if it was because she was still spooked or if she hoped to see Chance. Perhaps both.

Fritz led the way, stopping every now and then to check the tracks. So far, they'd only seen one set. Were they wasting their time, precious time for Curt and Karl? Not just wasting time but heading toward the sheriff. Fritz wouldn't be thrown in the jail if they were caught, but under it. She didn't dare contemplate what might happen to her.

No matter. Being separated from Chance would be more punishment than she could bear. Fritz stopped in front of her, so suddenly, she had to jerk back the reins of her horse sharply. When she brought her horse under control, she looked in the direction he stared, behind her on the path.

Her relief was so profound, her breath released in an audible swoosh. Klint and Chance rode to them as Deborah and Fritz reined their horses around to face them. Klint had his usual grin, but it was Chance who drew her gaze. She was afraid he'd be angry she'd not gone with him. Instead, a grin, almost as big as Klint's, split his face. She drank in the sight of him hungrily. She was vaguely aware Fritz sent her an annoyed look.

Klint put his gloved hands to his saddle horn and leaned toward them with a creak of his saddle. "What are y'all doing? Heading back to Brokken?"

Fritz leaned forward also and spoke quietly. "I got to thinking the print could belong to one of Juárez's men."

Chance pulled his gaze from her to look at her brother. "Why would they come this far north, venture this far into Texas? More likely one of the Andrews Gang."

Fritz shrugged his shoulders and glanced away. "Maybe," he said, the reluctance evident in his voice. "But, I'm more inclined to believe it was one of Juárez's men. In January, one of them came into the bank, demanding gold."

"I take it you did not tell the sheriff?" Chance shifted in his saddle.

Fritz straightened his shoulders and glanced from one of the men to the other. "No, but it's too late for regrets. When I left Brokken with my brothers, most of the men of the town were gone. Those left behind were too old or too young to do much."

Deborah bristled at his words. "Maybe it was mostly ladies left in

town, but you had no right to count us out—more than one of us can wield a gun.”

Fritz barely flicked his eyes toward her. “Still, I thought it best to keep the knowledge private. Why send everyone into a panic if we could handle it ourselves?”

Deborah frowned at him. “Because that’s what neighbors and family do. We help one another.”

Her brother sighed deeply. “Klint, come with me, and we’ll scout ahead. Chance, stay with Deborah until we return.”

Without another word, her brother turned his horse toward Brokken, and Klint followed.

Deborah and Chance dismounted, both watching until the two disappeared. The road had narrowed, barely a path. They moved off, into a more open area and dropped the reins. Deborah tucked her head down, shame burning her cheeks. Her brother had behaved abominably, even now. What must Chance think of her family? He touched her arm, and she glanced up at him through her lashes.

To her surprise, he, too, appeared embarrassed. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Whatever for?” She tilted her head back and widened her eyes.

“For leaving you. I never should have ridden away.” The warmth in his eyes sent shivers down her spine.

She searched his eyes, to be sure he was sincere. “No, it was my fault. I should have gone with you, not stayed with Fritz.”

A lopsided grin appeared on his face. “Isn’t it improper for a young lady to travel with two single men?”

She laughed. “I think breaking my brother and you two out of jail was a greater sin.”

He stepped closer, and her heart beat wildly in her chest. She should have retreated, but she stayed her ground. He took her hand and simply held it between them for a moment. She still wore her gloves, as did he. She desired to feel his skin against hers and pulled her hand free from his to peel off her glove. She placed her palm against his face and then traced the length of his jaw.

He caught her wrist and pulled it away, pulled her closer, to brush his lips over hers. This was not the intense kiss from the night before, but feather soft, and despite the softness, or because of it, a raging desire grew within her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head closer, for a deeper kiss.

He groaned and pulled out of her hold to bend his head to her ear. His breath was as light as a puff of wind, one that carried her away, beyond the cold and the worry that had beleaguered them.

He spoke softly. “How long do you think your brother and Klint will be gone?”

His words brought her to her senses. She pressed her palms against his chest, and he stepped back.

She frowned at him. "What are you suggesting Chance Hale?"

He threw his hands in the air in a gesture of surrender. "Nothing. It seems we're wasting a lot of time, standing around, doing nothing."

She narrowed her eyes and studied him. His face was all innocence, not embarrassed at all, although his eyes smoldered. Of course, it was she who should feel embarrassed. She pulled her glove back on and nibbled her bottom lip.

Chance watched her with his intense pale gray eyes, the irises circled with dark blue. The warmth inside her became a fire, as if dry kindling had been thrown on flames. She resisted the pull and forced her gaze away.

Klint and Fritz could be back any moment.

Heat rose to her cheeks, and even the cold air failed to cool them. No, she should not be alone with this man, not until they were safely married. She grabbed her horse's reins and walked closer to the path to peer down it in the direction Fritz and Klint had ridden. Her knees felt weak, and dizziness assailed her.

Chance came up beside her, and they stood shoulder to shoulder. He did not look in her direction, and she did not look toward him. Her breathing was too rapid, and she concentrated on slowing it down. It was difficult, no, impossible, with Chance standing so close. She moved to the other side of her horse to put distance between them. She leaned against the horse, drawing strength from the animal, and slowly, her legs grew stronger.

Some more minutes, a half hour or more, dragged by. Chance moved closer and squinted at the sun. "It'll be dark soon. We need to find a place to bed down."

Deborah bit her lip and looked away.

Chance let out an impatient sigh. "Deborah, you can be twenty feet away. Forty if that will make you feel better."

"Alone? Out here?" Her eyes widened.

"Not alone. Twenty feet away, and I can reach you in a second."

Maybe he could, but to be in the dark, in the cold, was not something she wanted. "We'd better stay together."

"Whatever you'd like. I plan to stay awake and keep watch."

"You need your rest. You didn't get any sleep last night. I'll keep watch."

"We'll take turns."

She nodded, and they moved down the trail a little, looking for a better clearing.

"We don't want to go too far," Chance cautioned. "We might miss Klint and Fritz otherwise."

She nodded again.

Chance stopped and indicated an area next to the path. "This should do."

Chance hobbled the horses not far from them while Deborah removed the largest rocks and pebbles and laid out the bedrolls. Chance brought back pemmican and their canteens, and they ate their supper.

"I'll take first watch," she told Chance. Coyotes yipped in the distance, their sound comforting, not distressing.

He nodded and climbed into his bedroll. In only minutes, he slept, not surprising with how tired he must be. But it hurt a little that he did not lie awake and think of her. She stifled a giggle and yawned.

The night was going to be a long one.



FRITZ SHOOK DEBORAH awake. She sat up startled and gasped. She'd never woken Chance, but when she glanced to his bedroll, he was not there, and neither was his bedroll.

Fritz motioned to her. "We must hurry."

She staggered to her feet and attempted to smooth her hair.

Fritz appeared haggard, and even Klint was serious.

Deborah waved impatiently. "What did you find out?"

Fritz looked toward the ground. "It wasn't Juárez's men."

"You mean it was someone the sheriff sent?"

Klint cocked his head. "That would be a relief. No, it's the Andrews Gang."

Her heart caught in her throat, and she put a hand to relieve the pressure. "They must have got wind of the gold."

"And a strange thing. A man was there—looked like the men deferred to him. I didn't get a close look, but he moved and looked a lot like Jonathan English." Fritz's lips pressed together to form a thin line.

Deborah frowned. "Sheriff Vic's husband? He was killed in the War."

"I didn't get a close look, but they sure favor. And another thing—I'm sure they have Curt and Karl with them—leastwise, two men trussed up like Christmas geese," Fritz said, his eyes distressed.

Deborah gasped. "But why would they have Curt and Karl?"

"No time for all this talk," Klint said. "We have to get going."

Chance walked up with the horses saddled and looked from one man to the other. "I heard y'all talking. The Andrews Gang? I will not go after them." His words were flat but defiant.

Fritz frowned. "Klint and I, if you're too much of a coward."

Chance showed no anger at his words but stepped closer. "How

many men did you see?"

Klint answered. "We counted twenty-two. Could be more."

Deborah's eyes widened, and Fritz turned to her, his face calm and composed. "We can handle them."

She gave a quick nod, his words calming her, steadying her. "Good."

Klint shook his head. "It's not going to be that easy. It's tricky with your brothers in their midst."

Chance gave a nod to Klint. "Exactly. What are your plans, Fritz?"

"The same as always. We have our rifles, and we'll use them." His gaze met Chance's and held it.

"Their guns outnumber ours by a wide margin." Chance narrowed his eyes, and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

Deborah shot Fritz a sharp look. "Someone has to ride into Brokken, to warn the people, if that's where they're heading."

Fritz turned to her. "Of course. You do that, and we'll go after the men."

Klint shook his head. "They're camped in that open area, above the lake."

"North of town?" Chance asked.

Klint nodded at him. "Yes. Now, listen. We need your rifle."

Surely, Chance would agree, but he already shook his head.

He snorted his disgust. "You just said they were in an open area. The nearest trees are too short to climb. You can't get close enough for a good shot. What would a rifle do in that situation?"

Fritz moved aggressively toward Chance who did not give ground. "What are you saying? Abandon my brothers?"

Klint placed a hand on Fritz's shoulder, as if to hold him back. "We need to think this through. We can't go marching up like pigs for slaughter."

Fritz frowned. "I did not imply that. We'll formulate a plan when we get to their camp."

Chance glared at him and inched closer. "You don't even have a plan?"

Klint held up a hand, palm toward them. "Hold on. I have an idea."

"What?" Fritz's gaze remained locked with Chance's.

They were both pigheaded. Deborah moved between the two men. "Listen to Klint. He's the only one with sense around here."

Her words were sharper than intended but had an effect. Both Chance and Fritz turned away from each other, although both still scowled.

Klint nodded his thanks to Deborah before he spoke. "Each of us will cover one of the roads into town. As far as we know, they haven't

ventured in—not from what we could tell. The sun’s barely up, and we may have time to stop them, if they head toward the town. I’ll take North Main, Fritz, you take South, and Chance can take East Street.”

Deborah held up a hand, as if a school girl. “Someone has to cover West Street. I’ll take it.”

Fritz shook his head. “Too dangerous.”

Deborah snorted. “You said they were north of town. I doubt seriously they’ll enter town on the road where the sheriff’s office sits.”

Fritz expression became solemn. “You underestimate them.”

Chance shook his head, placed his hands on his hips, and widened his stance. “You can count me out. I’m not covering East Street.”

Deborah faced him and frowned. “Not even to save my brothers?”

Chance surveyed her coolly. “We don’t know what the gang plans. We don’t even know for sure if they have your brothers. Besides, I signed up to help break them out of a Mexican prison, not to take on the Andrews Gang. The smart thing is to go after the sheriff and bring her and the posse back. They can handle this better than we can.”

Fritz spoke before she had a chance. “No. We have to act now. The location may be here instead of Mexico, but we still have a job to do.”

Deborah placed a hand on Chance’s arm and searched his face. She needed to make him understand. “My father sold guns to Emperor Maximilian and was paid in gold. Karl hid it somewhere, and maybe these men, the Andrews Gang, heard about it, broke Curt and Karl out, to find the location. What else would they be doing with my brothers?”

“Fritz couldn’t tell who it was,” Chance said.

“It’s them. I’d stake my life on it,” Fritz shot back.

Chance walked away a few steps and then back, his agitation evident in every step, coming to a stop in front of her brother. “Where is the gold, Fritz?”

Her brother’s eyes went flat, and he shook his head. “Your guess is as good as mine. You all saw where it was last, under the flat rock. I’m sure Lydia led the sheriff to it—maybe they still have it in their possession.”

Klint made a sound, half cough and half snort and cleared his throat. “Fritz, you told us that was the town’s gold.”

Deborah’s mouth gaped open, and she shot a sideways glance to Chance, who had gone very still, before turning her attention back to her brother.

Fritz’s eyes became hooded. “I lied so Lydia would tell the sheriff. The gold needed moving. If Curt and Karl were killed, at least Juárez’s men would not get the gold.”

Chance pushed past Klint and grabbed Fritz’s arm. “You, fool. You’ve put the sheriff and Lydia’s lives in danger.”

Fritz jerked away. "I didn't know those men would come here, to Brokken."

Deborah's heart sank. "If they don't find the hidden money, they'll probably rob the bank. There's a bit of money there."

Fritz shrugged. "More than a bit."

"What do you mean?" Deborah asked.

Fritz lips curled, in a semblance of a smile. "I've already told you we did not rob the bank. The town's money is still there—in the bank."

Chance was disgusted with Fritz and his lying. For a moment, he considered mounting his horse and riding away. If it had not been for Deborah, he would have.

She had taken her brother by his arm, shaking her head slightly. "You're mistaken. I've had the bank opened for months. The money is not there."

Fritz tilted his head, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he tried not to smile. "Did you get the marmalade we left for you?"

A puzzled frown appeared on her brow. "Yes. Sheriff Vic gave it to me."

Deborah had told Chance how much that small gesture had meant, how she'd been thinking of Christmas and the gifts of oranges from her father. And even though her brothers had robbed the bank, they'd at least left her a reminder of happier times—a jar of orange marmalade.

Fritz allowed the smile to fully form. "I take it you didn't open the jar?"

Deborah's cheeks turned a pleasing color of pink. "I had every intention to, that very day. I was going home to make biscuits for the Jennings brothers and share the marmalade with them, but I got sentimental, thinking I'd never see y'all again, and the marmalade would be all I had to remember you by. I put that jar away in my room and used a jar of preserves Grandmother had to feed the Jennings."

Fritz shook his head. "We were counting on you to open it. At least, eventually. It's where we hid the gold coins."

"Oh." Her mouth rounded before her brows she drew together. "But that was one small jar."

"The money was converted to gold, and how many jars of marmalade do we keep at the bank?"

Deborah's eyes widened. "You mean you put gold in all the jars of marmalade, the marmalade you keep in the back? All of those jars have gold coins?"

Neither Fritz or Deborah looked in his direction when Chance snorted. He kicked at the ground, and Klint exchanged a look with him, shaking his head.

Fritz laughed harshly, and then his expression softened toward his sister. "I guess when you reopened the bank you didn't treat the customers as we did."

Deborah shook her head. "No. I never set out the marmalade nor bought baked goods from Molly. It's taken me a while to learn the business and to get out of the red. But I don't understand. Why hide the money in jars?"

Fritz took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "We couldn't leave gold lying around, and we had no one to trust."

Deborah raised her brows, and her spine stiffened. "I beg your pardon."

Fritz at least had the decency to appear contrite. "I'm sorry, Deb. You've always been our kid sister. We didn't notice you'd grown up and were capable of taking over the business."

Chance narrowed his eyes at the man whom Deborah still evidently cared about. Her brothers had not had the sense to see her true worth.

Deborah's face smoothed. "I don't like it, but I understand."

Fritz swung an arm in the air, as if he could erase all his mistakes. "Besides, we thought we'd be back inside two weeks, and we left enough money to cover that time. Our plan was to negotiate the price with the emissary, give them the gold and be done with it. We never expected to be thrown into prison." His expression became soft, and he blinked away tears.

Unexpectedly, Chance was affected. Why he felt sorry for Fritz, he didn't know. He cleared his throat. "You must have thought there was a possibility you'd never return and figured someone was bound to open a jar and discover the gold."

"No one thinks they're going to be imprisoned, perhaps killed." Fritz's face cleared, and he shrugged as if it was a minor manner.

Chance nodded. He didn't know all Fritz had been through, could only imagine what the Mexican prison had been like, and he wasn't going to press further.

"Speaking of which," Klint said. "We've got to solidify a plan."

"Why not simply give them what they want? Maybe they'll go and leave us in peace," Chance said.

Deborah looked at him as if she didn't know him. "Are you afraid to fight?"

Chance looked to the ground and scrubbed the toe of his boot in the dirt. "I've seen enough killing to last a lifetime."

"We all have, and it's not something to take lightly," Klint said. His voice held sadness, a wistfulness, Chance had never heard from him.

Klint nodded. "I agree. Deborah needs to ride to the ranches in the area, gather up as many men... er, folks as she can find, bring them into town. I'll go in to warn the people in town, maybe set up some defenses."

Chance shook his head. "What if some of the men are already

there?"

Deborah spoke. "We can be discreet, check around first."

Fritz took his thumb and pushed his hat back. "I'll go back to their camp, watch their movements, before heading to North Main."

Deborah gave Chance a pleading look before she spoke. "We need more help."

"I'll ride for the sheriff," Chance replied.

Deborah began to speak but snapped her mouth shut and turned away.

Klint looked to him, and when he spoke, his voice, too, pleaded. "We need your help, your rifle, Chance."

All eyes turned to him, and he met each in turn with a level gaze. This was a decision he'd lived with for years, and he didn't plan to change his mind. "I'll ride for the sheriff," he repeated.

Fritz nodded although the planes of his face hardened. He spoke as if every word pained him. "Let's get going before it gets any later. And remember, they might already be in town. Tread carefully."

Deborah mounted her horse without speaking. Chance went to her and looked up. "Deborah..."

"You heard them. We've got to get going." But her face softened when his eyes met hers.

"Be careful." He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, but his throat constricted.

She urged her horse forward, and he moved out of her way, leaving so much unsaid. She didn't look back.

Deborah swiped away the tears on her cheeks. Chance refused to help, when they needed him most. She shivered in the cold morning and the fear thrummed her temples.

The Andrews Gang—she'd heard of them. Everyone had.

She had to tamp down the panic and present a calm presence when she spoke to people. No need to set everyone in an uproar. If they all ran around like chickens with their heads chopped off, all would be chaos. As she rode along, she rehearsed what she'd say.

She pulled her horse to a stop at Fenton's Blueberry Farm, slid from her horse, and ran to the door. She took a deep breath, smoothed her clothes, and knocked. Mr. Fenton answered the door, a quizzical expression on his face.

"Mr. Fenton, the Andrews Gang is in nearby. You could be in danger or, if not yourself, our town. Please consider going into Brokken with your sons."

Mr. Fenton stared at her, scratched his head, and squinted. "Miss Brokken?"

"Yes. It's me."

"I heard the sheriff was looking for you."

She'd almost forgotten. She licked her lips. "Yes, sir. That was a misunderstanding. Listen, the gang has been spotted north of town. Please head there and help defend it."

"Sorry, Miss Brokken. Until I hear from the sheriff herself, I plan to stay right here, me and mine."

He moved to close the door, and she put her flat palm against it. "Wait. You have to believe me. The gang kidnapped my brothers, Curt and Karl."

"Your brothers? Last I heard tell, they were in a Mexican prison; that is, if you can believe half of what Mr. Fritz has to say. Missus Walsh told me anyone could tell he's been lying through his teeth. And that lady is pretty sharp when it comes to fettering out such things."

Deborah stamped her foot with impatience. "We need help, and if everyone is murdered, is your conscience going to smite you because you believed that woman's gossip?"

"Gossip? Sounded to me it was the gospel truth." And before she could react, he'd pulled the door closed, and she heard the bar slide into place.

Great. Everyone already knew about Fritz and his lies, knew the

sheriff was looking for them. Mrs. Walsh didn't waste time letting folks know.

Deborah stood a moment, undecided, and shivered in the cold. Isaac was the only one who would help. Maybe the Jennings would come too. They were mere boys, but boys younger than they had marched off to the War. That would be three more, at least. Better than none.

She ignored the steps, leapt from the porch, and ran to her horse.



KLINT HAD GOTTEN THINGS well organized by the time Deborah reached West Street, already barricaded. She smiled her appreciation as Klint motioned her around.

He face creased in puzzlement as he watched Isaac and the Jennings brothers ride in behind her. "Are they the only ones who would help?"

She raised her shoulders in a gesture of defeat. "Sorry. I tried Mr. Fenton's place first, and he knew the sheriff was after us. I thought it'd be useless to check any of the other ranches. Talk runs fast and furious in small towns like Brokken."

"You did what you could," he said. "I had problems convincing some of the town folks." When she dismounted, he moved closer and lowered his voice. "I may have had to lie to get them to cooperate."

Deborah managed a weary smile. "Fritz is rubbing off on you."

But she wasn't amused. When was the lying going to stop? She sighed heavily. "Should I go to South Main, set up a barricade there? I take it none of the gang are yet in town."

"I haven't had time to search all the buildings. The Jennings can check from here to the saloon."

"I'll help."

"No, you wait on the street and keep a lookout. Isaac can go into the buildings with the Jennings."

She frowned at the authority in his voice. A couple of days ago, she'd been his boss. A tightness at the corners of his mouth, along with a hard shine in those sky-blue eyes, persuaded her. She nodded. "All right. How about East Street?"

The street Chance refused to help with, riding after the sheriff instead. She pushed the thought from her mind. She had to focus on the job at hand.

"I sent the butcher, Mr. Maddux, over there with some others. The roads are covered, but we need to hurry." Klint walked away.

Isaac handed her a rifle. He had his revolvers in a holster strapped around his waist. He took one out to hand to the oldest Jennings boy. "Take good care of that. I want it back in the same shape I'm giving it

to you.” Isaac’s demeanor, as always, was calm, serene. “Ready, Miss Deborah?”

She nodded and mounted her horse. It would give her a better view, allowing her to scan the area more easily. She followed Isaac and the boys as the frigid air bit her neck. She loosened her hair, allowing it to cascade down her back. She pulled up the collar of her coat.

The boys and Isaac entered each establishment and returned quickly. Alexander raised an arm each time he reappeared to let her know all was clear.

The boys were wiry and as quick as a rattlesnake striking. The walk took no longer than twenty minutes at most. The train depot was the last building searched.

She dismounted and looked around for something, anything to block the tracks. Rebecca, Lydia’s sister, came out of the livery, her face none too friendly. “What’s going on?”

The last time she’d seen Rebecca was in the Walsh kitchen. Rebecca had grilled Deborah and Lydia endlessly. She was in an even fouler mood now. Who could blame her when Lydia was in trouble because of the Brokkens? Perhaps they could mend their friendship later, but there was no time now.

“Anyone else around?” Deborah asked.

“Jake and Noah joined the posse, went after you and the others.” Rebecca laughed. “The sheriff should have waited here for you. A bad penny always shows up.”

Deborah bit her bottom lip. “Where is Lydia?”

“The sheriff handcuffed her and took her with her.”

Guilt made heat suffuse her cheeks. The Walsh family suffered as much as the Brokkens. “What of your mother?”

“Mother is prostrate in the bed, has been since Lydia and you broke Fritz, Chance, and Klint out of jail.”

“Do you need to tend to her?”

“No. She thinks I’m a nuisance. She keeps asking for Lydia.” Rebecca’s faced twisted, replaced with a wistful look that softened her features.

“I’m sorry. And your other sister, Hannah Beth? Where is she?”

“She’s at the school, helping Miss Edna. She’s to be the new school teacher next year. Miss Edna’s health has been poorly, and she’s decided to retire. Beth has been helping for several months.”

“Oh. But she knows about the Andrews Gang, that they are close to town?”

“The Andrews Gang?” A smile played on Rebecca’s lips, and she shook her head, a wary look coming into her eyes. “I don’t know what you’re up to Deborah Brokken.”

"I assure you I am telling the truth."

"As you did a couple of days ago? When you sent Isaac to lure us away, so that you could steal the horses?" She scoffed.

Deborah gasped. Rebecca accused them of something worse than breaking out of jail or even robbing a bank. "Have you said that to anyone else?"

Rebecca's stance softened. "No... I'm sorry, Deborah. I don't want to see anyone hang for being a horse thief. And, really, one was your own. I suppose the others Lydia has a share in and letting you borrow them is not a crime." Red stained her cheeks. "I should not have said you stole them."

Deborah needed to take advantage, before Rebecca's guilt was assuaged. "We have to get defenses up. Will you help?"

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you." For a moment, Deborah considered giving Rebecca a hug. She changed her mind, afraid the prickliness would return.

"What can I do?"

Deborah rubbed her temples. "We need something to go across the tracks, to block the road."

"We have the wagon. I'll get the mules hitched."

Deborah nodded. "Or we can push it out? The Jennings boys are here and Isaac."

"That would probably be easier."

"Let me get some help." Deborah moved away, her head downcast.

They'd made a mess of things and an even bigger mess was to come. And all of it was because of the Brokkens. She stopped for a moment, to allow the sorrow to flow through her. Yes, they'd made mistakes, lied, got others involved—Lydia, Chance, and Clint—made the sheriff look foolish, and threw the whole town in a panic when their money, entrusted to the Brokken Bank disappeared. And brought sorrow to the entire Walsh family.

She shook her head sadly. When all of this was over, if they didn't all wind up behind bars, she probably needed to pack and head to Boston with her grandparents. How would she ever hold her head up in this town again?

Chance had ridden away, to find the sheriff, when he should have stayed beside her, stayed even if their chances were slim against the Andrews Gang.

She gritted her teeth. She could wallow in misery after this was over. Right now, she had to try to save the town, the town her father founded. Tears pricked her eyes at the thought of her father.

What was wrong with her? Her body ached with loss and sorrow while her sympathetic feet remained rooted to the spot.

Chance held her heart, but with trust destroyed, how long before

their love followed? She took a deep breath, as if about to plunge in an icy lake, like that time in early January when she was eleven and jumped into the pond at the shooting house, on a dare from Fritz.

She was still brave and would face what was ahead, with or without Chance. She could do nothing to summon his presence. Instead, she had to prepare to fight the Andrews Gang who descended on their town.

Finally, her feet moved, and she hurried away to find Isaac and the boys.

Chance fiddled with the horse's reins after Deborah had ridden away. What must she think of him? He went to the saddle, where the scabbard was, and pulled the rifle out, feeling the weight of it in his hands. Sheriff Vic had told him to quit hiding behind his hat, to accept who he was, a hero. Did that mean accepting the rifle, too?

He didn't feel like a hero. To climb high into a tree, take aim at unsuspecting men, and shoot them had brought him only misery. Yes, the sharpshooters had shortened the War, he'd been told, saved lives on both sides, but it seemed a cowardly way to fight.

Why had he ever done it?

It'd been a game, at first. They'd gone off to War, thinking it'd last a few short months. Heck, that first battle, folks came out to picnic, to watch them fight. It was a picnic seared on their minds forever, he was sure.

War was not a game. He'd been young, wet behind the ears, eager to prove his worth. And he had. The other men recognized his skills, congratulated him, gave him accolades. And he'd willingly accepted them. Until he'd shot his own brother.

To tell the truth, he had few memories of what happened after that. He'd not put the rifle down but had continued the shooting, going through the motions he'd already learned so well.

The wind was cold on his neck, and he pulled up the collar of his coat and leaned against his horse. He'd continued for one reason. He had wanted to die. How could he live when his brother's life had been snuffed out? When he could never return home to face his family after what he had done.

He'd wanted death so badly, he could taste it, taste it like as strong as the taste of blood, that time when the Reb had smashed him in the mouth with the butt of his rifle.

That day, he'd snuck behind Rebel lines and found himself in a tree, and somehow had missed the Rebel sharpshooter sitting on the limb above him. Didn't see him until he'd climbed right up beside him. Somehow, the Reb had missed him, too.

Not that it was surprising.

Chance had a way of moving, silently, stealthily. Many a time growing up he'd startled his mother when he went into the kitchen to sneak a biscuit. God had given him that skill. He'd been born with a slow, deliberate way of moving that barely caused the smallest of tree limbs to move when he climbed a tree.

It was a good hunting skill to have, even when the prey was his fellow man. He gave a wry smile as a tightness entered his chest and twisted inside him. He turned so that his back was to the horse. He still held the rifle and lifted it to his shoulder, remembering the feel, before lowering it.

Chance had taken off his greatcoat to climb the tree, that day. The Reb perched on a frail branch, looking like a bird about to fly away. The man's dark brown eyes widened when it dawned on him whom he was looking at.

By that time of the War, even the members of the Confederacy knew him. His image had been passed around from hand to hand, and a bounty put on his head. Chance was easily recognizable by his gray eyes, not entirely gray but marked with a circle of navy blue around the irises. Maybe God had marked Chance, the way he'd marked Cain, so folks would recognize him for what he was.

The Reb had gone slack jaw and then smiled in recognition. Funny what the man had said. "I admire your work," as if Chance had been an artist, a painter. And then the Red had come up with the stock of his gun, smashing Chance in the mouth. The blood pooled, and Chance spit a glob, even as he lost his balance and crashed backwards. But God, or the Devil, had been with him.

When he fell back, his suspenders caught on a limb. Right then and there, he'd recited Psalm 139—"If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

And by the time, he'd righted himself, his knife drawn, the Reb had scrambled down the tree. Chance didn't draw a bead on him but allowed him to scurry away.

With the pain of a busted chin and lip, Chance did his duty. He marked a man at the cannon, his original target, and shot, long before the Reb sharpshooter ever made it back to warn him.

Even now, Chance laughed bitterly at what followed. The Reb embellished the story of their meeting and turned Chance into a legend, if he'd not been one before. But if the Reb hadn't run off scared, he would have seen the damage he'd inflicted, would have finished him off easily, given Chance the death he'd longed for.

Instead, Chance had done his job, climbed down the tree, retrieved his green greatcoat, and stumbled back to camp, dizzy from blood loss. He had needed ten stitches. Not only was his chin split open, but his upper lip, clean up to his nose. The surgeon had been skilled, or perhaps had taken special care because of Chance's reputation.

Chance touched the barely perceptible scars now and thought of why he'd recited the psalm when the Reb had smacked him. Surprisingly, his words had been clear and loud, even though he'd had

a mouthful of blood.

Chance, by that time, had long since quit believing in God, after seeing all the gore and destruction, seeing men with limbs sawed off, who'd never be able to make a living again, if they did survive the War. All that blood and gore, and where was God?

And yet, after being smashed in the mouth, he'd recited the psalm. He frowned and wondered why it stuck in his mind. He ran his hand along the barrel of the rifle and recited it now to see if saying the words would offer a clue.

O lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.

Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.

For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.

Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me.

Inexplicably, tears came to his eyes, ran down his cheeks. He found himself on his knees, sobbing, as he'd done that day with Isaac. He struggled to his feet, gripping the rifle, and repeated a part of the psalm he'd never paid attention to before.

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men.

For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain.

Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?

I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.

Everyone knew of the Andrews Gang, and the atrocities they'd committed. Were they not enemies of God? Were they not rising up against God, going against everything Godly and holy? Would it be so wrong to protect those he loved from such men? He was fearfully made. Even he couldn't deny it, as much as he wanted to. His movements were slow and deliberate, his hands steady, his hearing,

his senses, attuned to all around him.

God had given him abilities that exceeded those of most men. If he was honest, his ability with the rifle exceeded that of any man he'd ever known. The rifle felt but an extension of his hand, as much a part of him as his own fingers.

Not that he'd ever asked for such gifts and considered them more a curse than a blessing.

But if God had given them for a reason?

And yet why? He'd shot Paul. Tears slid down his face again as more of the words of the psalm came to him: "Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

The darkness had covered him, but even the night was light to God. He didn't understand why his brother had to die, but the War had killed not only Paul, but thousands upon thousands of good men. And those who were not killed had been maimed, if not in body, in spirit.

To God, even the blackest of times were the same as the light. He pondered that for a moment. He'd been so caught up in his own pain during the War that he'd not noticed the other men... much. But even he could not fail to notice how fast friendships formed, how the men helped one another, risked their own lives, brought light in the darkest of times.

Remembering was one more pain for him to bear for none had befriended him. Partly it was his own doing, the path he'd chosen, seeking solitude to nurse his sorrow.

But there was another reason he had been friendless. The men had been frightened of him, some perhaps jealous. He'd been a better shot by such a wide margin, that it was something they'd not been comfortable with. He'd heard more than one man say God's hand was upon him, and that was enough to frighten some away.

He'd tried to escape his fate, to run from God, but no matter where he went, God was with him, holding him fast, even when he'd been hit with the butt of the rifle and fell backwards, to be caught upon the tree limb.

In the weeks, months, since he'd shot his own brother, he had yearned for death, tasted it, tasted it as surely as he had tasted the blood that day when he'd been smacked in the mouth. He'd spit globs of blood and endured, hanging on the limb, quoting scripture, and scaring the man away.

And then had come the agonizing suturing of his mouth and chin wounds because God didn't give him what he wanted, had not quite been finished with him.

Maybe God saved his life for just such a time as this, when the town of Brokken was being threatened by a gang of outlaws. How could he simply walk away?

He couldn't. He wouldn't. Not from Deborah.

He looked at the rifle in his hands. It felt right. He prayed he'd not have to use it.

Chance decided to skirt the north side of town, to scout out the movements of the gang, but found their camp abandoned. Fear knocked on the door. He refused to answer, except to murmur *Amor fati*.

The main trail led to the southeast, although two smaller groups had splintered off. A pang of guilt assailed him. The main group had headed toward East Street, the place Fritz had asked him to guard. But surely, they'd found enough people to help. He prayed they were ready for the onslaught.

He scanned the area as he rode forward, every muscle tense, and pressed closer to his mount. As far as he knew, his horse had no name. *Fati*, he whispered, and patted the horse's neck. The mare tossed her head as if nodding in agreement. He pressed closer to her, knowing she would sense an unknown presence long before he did.

The tracks from the gang, as he'd already surmised, entered the town on East Street. Molly and Thomas lived on the very end, on the outskirts of town, and Chance gave the house a glance.

The tracks did not lead to their house, thankfully, although he doubted they were home. Molly owned the restaurant, and this was a busy time, getting close to the dinner hour.

A body lay on the ground, not far from the Reed home. Chance gave the body a quick glance, noting it was the butcher. If anyone else from town had been guarding the road, they were gone. He hoped they'd fled, not been shot down.

On the left, not far down the road from the Reed home, stood the school. He almost rode past it when he felt *Fati* tense. He pulled back on the reins when the door of the school creaked open. Fear beat a tattoo at the base of his throat until he recognized Miss Edna who peered through the cracked door.

He turned *Fati* off the street and rode right up to the school before he dismounted.

Her eyes were round and unfocused, looking beyond him. Yet, when she greeted him, her voice was calm and strong, from years of dealing with unruly children, he was sure. She'd been a fixture in the town for many years, and Deborah held fond memories of her, and they'd occasionally taken treats to her, especially lately. Her health was not the best. She'd decided to retire at the end of the year, and Lydia's bookish sister, Beth, would be accepting the position.

Even now, the pallor of her skin was evident, whether from fear or

illness, he didn't know. She searched his face. "Who were those men who rode by? I've never seen such a large group of riders."

He considered whether to tell her the truth but a moment. Enough lies had been told for a lifetime. "The Andrews Gang."

She put a hand to her throat, and fingered the medallion threaded through a silky black ribbon around her throat. She gave no other sign of agitation. "What are they doing here?"

He ignored her question and gestured inside. "Are the children all here? I don't hear a peep."

"Yes. I have them reading."

"Anyone else?"

"No. Miss Beth Walsh was here, but she left when those men rode by, to find out who they were."

Chance nodded. Miss Edna was a strict disciplinarian, and the children obeyed her—usually. Sometimes, one or two would get out of hand, like the Jennings boys, or Calvin and Devon.

"Good. Keep them here." He considered a moment. "Might be best to get them down low, on the floor."

She dropped her voice to a whisper and gave a half smile. "I can manage that. We'll make a game of it, pretend we're in a cave."

"And don't worry about the sounds from the roof. I'm going to climb up, to see if I can get a sight on where those men may have gone." Although he already knew, more than likely, they headed toward the bank.

She nodded. "I'll tell them it is Santa, come to check their behavior." She smiled, her face ashen but composed. "Thank you, Mr. Hale."

"Bolt the door," he warned her.

She did as he said, and he took Fati's reins and led her to a shed out back, beyond the outhouse, where the children's horses were kept, those who rode to school. Fati nickered softly at the other horses, and he left her, and headed back to the back of the building.

The school bell was in a square tower on top, and someone had had the foresight to make it easier to climb to the top for repairs. For on the wall were handholds, simple short pieces of wood that had been nailed into place. He glanced around, made sure no one watched and climbed with his rifle.

Not wishing to frighten the children, he made an extra effort to tread softly, although his naturally quiet step made little sound.

As he walked toward the bell, his gaze swept the area. He had a good view of the town hall, the Brokken Bank, to the south, and Molly's Restaurant, the butcher's shop, and the Brokken General Store to the north. He could not see beyond the buildings into the street. However, where East Street intersected with Main, a group of men

gathered, a small group of only five or six. Two of them favored Fritz, and he suspected they were the two missing Brokken brothers. Their hands were tied behind their backs. His eyes adjusted, his vision sharpened, and he counted three others, arms folded, relaxed.

He calculated the distance and knew he could make the shot, shoot all three men before they knew what hit them. He hesitated, not only because of his reluctance to shoot the rifle, but afraid of what lay beyond the buildings. Fritz had said there were upwards of thirty men. Shooting three would not solve the problem. In the chaos that would be sure to follow, Deborah's brothers might be killed.

He looked to the south but could make out no figures, no movement. Where were Klint, Fritz, and Deborah? And hadn't they gathered more folks to help? The minutes ticked by. Had he made a mistake climbing onto the roof of the school? What good was he doing?

A smell traveled to him, carried on the wind. *Smoke*.

Although a tight fit, he climbed into the bell tower, placing a hand on the bell to still it, and looked for the source of smoke. The smell grew stronger, and horses neighed in the distance. And then all hell broke loose.

A popping sounded—*gunfire*. Flames leapt from several buildings—the bank, the general store, the butcher's shop, the restaurant. He stood to get a better look. Riders on horseback galloped from the middle of town, the gang fleeing. Klint, Fritz, and perhaps others had driven them from Main Street. They fled toward him and the school. He ducked behind the bell, praying they'd ride by.

Instead, four of the men turned to the schoolhouse, torches in hand. Surely, they would not set fire to the building, not with children inside? Glass broke as one of the men flung his torch.

And then, from the other riders, more broke off, perhaps ten, and circled back to the school. Chance laid down suppression fire, and they pulled their horses up, hesitating.

A group turned their horses and rejoined the riders who fled down the road, but that left eight circling the school, firing toward the school bell. Chance raised his rifle to his shoulder, stood, and fired. Shots whizzed by him, but he ignored them, intent on his targets.

These men Chance took care of swiftly, beginning with the men who carried torches. Even so, flames leapt from inside the building, and the front stoop also burned. Chance grabbed the clapper of the bell and clanged it, until his heart beat like an angry fist in his chest.

No one appeared to help, but the children, followed by their teacher, clambered out the window on the west side. Chance slid to the edge, to watch as the children made their escape.

Chance looked to the west. A couple of stragglers rode by, the last

of the gang, and he raised his rifle, but they rode at a fast gallop and were difficult to get a bead on. He chose to let them go.

Miss Edna was a hundred or so yards safely away from the licking flames, ushering the children ahead of her, except for a young girl who held her hand. The teacher glanced over her shoulder, spotted Chance, and fully turned to give a signal that all the children were safe.

But uneasiness fluttered in his gut. He felt disoriented, as if he had slipped off the roof and dangled there, effects from inhalation of the smoke, he suspected. He had to get off the roof. Parts already collapsed, leaving gaping holes between him and the handholds in the back. And yet, he continued watching her.

Fear clawed at his belly for her safety and the safety of her charges, but they were now out of reach of the bullets, out of the reach of those who had fled. Miss Edna gave him a wave of thanks as the bell pinged.

Chance knew, without turning, that the last straggler had fired and missed. But something in the way the teacher stood drew his attention, and he barely glanced as the man rode by.

He kept his eyes on Miss Edna, attempting to discern his uneasiness. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the teacher slumped to the ground.

Chance frowned. Had she fainted? No one was close enough to have shot her. Flames continued leaping behind him, from inside the school, up through the holes that had burned through the roof.

He ignored them as his eyes scanned the area. Not a soul moved. The man who had fired the last shot was gone, leaving only dust that settled in the direction he had ridden.

Chance still stood, unmoving, perplexed, when he looked back to Miss Edna. Surely, she must have fainted—her health had been poorly, after all. At her waist, a red satin ribbon shimmered in the sun.

He squinted. Miss Edna had not been wearing red. The young girl, seemingly too young to be a student, stood next to her, tugging her hand. Miss Edna remained unmoving. The flames from the school licked higher, and his dizziness increased. It took all his strength to move his legs, as if he'd already fallen and had yet to comprehend it. He slipped and slid across the roof, making it to the back, and scrambled over the side as the roof collapsed, leaving only the backwall. He worked his way down the footholds, jumped the last few feet to the ground, and sprinted to the teacher's side.

He knelt next to the girl, pulling her hand loose from Miss Edna's limp one. He knew without checking that the woman was dead. Even though he had not known her well, tears formed in his eyes.

The little girl reached again for Miss Edna's hand. "G'maw, get

up.”

Chance lifted the girl in his arms. “Grandma? Was she your grandmother?”

The little girl nodded, her blonde hair blowing in the cold wind. Chance glanced around until he located the other children. They huddled in a small group, on the platform at the depot. Luckily, it had not been set on fire.

He trotted over to them, noting other buildings still burned. A couple of the girls on the platform looked to be twelve or thirteen, old enough to watch the little girl. He set her down.

“I have to go, but I’ll be back to check on you... Miss?” He blinked at the little girl.

“Sally,” the youngster said.

He nodded. “Miss Sally, stay with Missy.” He recognized the girl he pointed to as the butcher’s daughter. “Missy, you’ll take good care of her?”

Missy nodded and took the little girl’s hand. Chance ran down the street, toward the center of town, filling with smoke. He glanced over his shoulder, and the little girl watched, her eyes large and solemn, her long blonde hair blowing in the wind.

Deborah joined with the others to pass buckets of water for Fritz to pour on the flames from the bank. She didn't want to think and focused on the feel of the bucket, concentrated on not spilling a drop as she passed it along.

Her mind did not want to comprehend what her eyes saw. Curt and Karl sprawled in the street, not more than twenty feet from her place in line, and red fanned from them. Miss Abby was tending to them, the best she could. Her glance sought Deborah's more than once, as if she pleaded for understanding. Understand what? That her brothers lay dying in the streets? Her bottom lip quivered. She sniffled, inhaling the smoke that grew thicker around them. She looked down at the bucket in her hand before she passed it to the person beside her.

If her shoulders ached, if her hands grew tired, she did not know it. She was numb and operated mechanically, feeling nothing, wanting to feel nothing.

She blinked when someone ran by, someone she knew. She focused, and Chance came into view. He threw her a terse smile of relief before kneeling beside Miss Abby. In but a moment, he had Curt in his arms, carrying him as easily as a child, across the street, down Main, toward the doctor's office. He returned in a few minutes to scoop up Karl, and Abby followed him.

New life infused her arms, and she called out encouraging words to those near her, Sophia and Lavendar. And then, blessed relief, coming down West Street, at a gallop, were Sheriff Victoria and the men of Brokken.

They slid from their horses before coming to a complete stop. The men moved forward to help, and Deborah, Lavendar, and Sophia stepped back to allow them to take their places.

Without a word, Deborah headed toward Miss Abby's. Sophia and Lavender fell in step beside her, hurrying to catch up.

Sophia reached a hand to grab Deborah's arm, stopping her. "Do you want us to go in with you?"

Deborah shook her head wearily. "No, ma'am. I'm fine."

Sophia nodded. "We're going to check the hotel, to make sure those ruffians did no damage there."

Deborah nodded. She moved along the path to Miss Abby's and opened the door without knocking. Her legs weakened. Her entire body ached. And yet, the numbness had not left her. She moved on

automatic, her heart knowing she could not bear the pain of losing her brothers if it left.

Chance came down the hallway toward her, and she went into his arms. He wrapped her tightly, rocking gently before releasing her.

His intense eyes focused on her for a brief second, as if seeing into her very soul, plunging the depths, seeking her out. "I have to go, Deborah. They need my help. The children from the school are at the depot... without their teacher."

And then he was gone.

Her weakened legs carried her forward. Curt and Karl were in the front parlor, on makeshift beds. Their closed eyes, their pallor, as still as death, their chests moving almost imperceptibly, but they breathed. The alternative was too painful to contemplate, and the numbness returned.

Miss Abby smiled weakly. "I'm doing my best. If only Mathew were here!"

"He is. Sheriff Vic just returned," Deborah said, smiling weakly.

Relief flooded Abby's face. "I'm sure he'll be here shortly."

Deborah studied her brothers again, as impassionately as if she looked upon a rock. "Will they survive?"

Abby shrugged. "Only time will tell. Curt lost a lot of blood, and Karl has a stomach wound. It's possible the bullets missed any vital organs, but if his intestine was perforated..." She let her words trail off.

Deborah nodded again. "Chance said the children were at the depot. I'll go fetch them."

"It's terrible what happened to Miss Edna."

"What happened?" Deborah asked, listlessly.

"Chance didn't tell you?" Miss Abby clasped her hands together and looked down. "A bullet ricocheted from the school bell. It killed her. Instantly, from what Chance said."

"At least she did not suffer," Deborah replied, listlessly. Miss Edna dead, her brothers barely clinging to life, half the town burning... and Deborah felt nothing. Nevertheless, she had a job to do. "I'll take the children to the hotel for now. Sophia and Lavendar can help with them."

Miss Abby gave her a hug that Deborah did not return. "I'll take good care of your brothers."

Deborah pulled away. "I've got to go." And she went out and to the depot. She slowed her steps as she neared the children. They huddled together, the youngest ones, at the very end of the platform.

Deborah breathed deeply and brought forth a smile, weak though it was, as wobbly as her legs had become. "Who wants some of Miss Sophia's egg custard?"

Several heads nodded, and when she motioned, they moved forward.

One of the older boys, who'd been standing away from the others, narrowed his eyes at her and stepped in front of the children. "Don't go with her. It's Deborah Brokken. She's wanted by the sheriff, along with her brothers, and those other two fellows."

Deborah straightened her shoulders. "That was all a misunderstanding." She attempted to brighten her smile, but the boy crossed his arms.

A little girl whom she'd never seen before broke free from an older girl, Missy, and ran to her. "I want my g'maw."

Deborah lifted her in her arms, the girl as light as a feather. "Who is your grandmother? We'll find her in a minute."

The boy laughed harshly. "Not alive, you won't."

Missy Maddux punched the boy in the arm. "Stop it, Joshua."

Deborah's heart sank. Miss Edna was her grandmother? Miss Edna never mentioned she had children, not since Deborah had known her.

Missy motioned to the younger children. "We're going with Miss Brokken. Come along."

To Deborah's relief, the children obeyed Missy. Deborah bit her bottom lip. Did Missy know her father had been killed, shot down in the street? For a moment, the numbness broke and tears threatened, but she blinked them away. She had to stay calm for the children.

The hotel was only a short distance from the depot. Sophia and Lavendar were working at one of the dining room tables when they entered, filling baskets with food.

Both widened their eyes at the children and exchanged a glance with Deborah, who was too tired to explain.

"You've brought us some pleasant company, I see," Sophia exclaimed with false brightness.

"Yes, ma'am. The children were at the depot."

One of the children stepped forward, a child Deborah did not know. He must have come with his father when the town had advertised for men. "The school is burning down," he said matter-of-factly.

Deborah shushed him and turned back to Sophia. "Do you have any custard pie? I promised them some."

Lavendar nodded vigorously. "We made five this morning. I'll make sure everyone gets a piece as soon as I get back. I'm delivering this to fortify those who are fighting the fires."

"The older boys can help, Lavendar. I'll get the pie for the children," Sophia said.

She headed to the kitchen and the children followed. The little girl still in Deborah's arms wiggled to get down, and she set her on her

feet.

After the last child disappeared through the kitchen door, Deborah put the boys to work, to finish packing the baskets.

She pulled Lavendar aside. "Who is that little girl?"

"Miss Edna's granddaughter," she whispered.

Deborah frowned "But Miss Edna had no children."

"The rumor is..." Lavendar tilted her head closer to Deborah. "Miss Edna had a child out of wedlock, before ever coming to Brokken, all those years ago. I don't know how her daughter found her but find her she did. Last week, she arrived by stagecoach with that little girl."

"Where is Miss Edna's daughter now? She needs to know her mother has been killed." Deborah should have softened her words, judging from Lavendar's reaction.

The woman blanched, put a hand to her chest, and took a step back, as if hit. "No! Oh, bless that baby's heart."

Deborah nodded, as if she felt the same pain. "Where's her mother?"

"She left. She took the same stagecoach out."

Lavendar's cheeks were still pale, so pale Deborah touched her shoulder. "Are you all right? Do you need a glass of water?"

"Tea would be more to my liking, and we just made a fresh pot." Lavendar looked at Deborah more closely. "You're the one who needs to sit down before you fall down. My goodness, you are pale!"

Lavendar took her arm and led her to a chair. Deborah gladly sank down, beyond exhausted. Lavendar poured her a cup of tea.

Deborah longed to put her head on her arms, to sleep, but the children were in her care. She would not leave them. "What's the little girl's name?"

"Sally. Sally Jane. She's three or four years old—I'm not quite sure. Sally Jane was one of the reasons Miss Edna was retiring."

"Oh." And what was to become of the little girl now? She'd talk to Sheriff Vic and see if they could track down her mother.

Lavendar touched her arm gently. "How are your brothers?"

Deborah's mouth refused to work. It twitched until she gave in and laid her head on her arms. The numbness had gone, replaced with a hopeless sorrow. She cried to rid herself of her pain and heartache, cried until she hiccupped, and still she cried, for the pain remained. She inhaled with the desperation of a drowning woman, for that's what she was—a woman drowning in her tears. Lavendar patted her back and made soothing noises. Deborah regretted distressing her, as she knew she must be doing, but the tears would not abate.

Sophia returned with the children, and the tears finally abated. Deborah was able to assuage her grief. She quickly sat up and swiped at her cheeks.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” she mumbled to Sophia and made her way to the kitchen.

She splashed water on her face and wiped it with a dishcloth. She had no idea what had happened to her own handkerchief. She still wore the britches from the other day, when she and Lydia had broken the men out of jail.

Lavendar, her face soft and mild, came into the kitchen, bringing her a cup of tea in a porcelain cup. Lavendar had changed into a pale pink dress with rosebuds and a triple flounced skirt. Probably Deborah should change, too, but she could not summon the energy to walk home to do so.

After Lavendar left, Deborah slid on the bench picked the thin cup up from its saucer, held it with both hands, and raised it in front of her, as if an oblation to the gods. Tears still stung, felt as if they’d sting her forever.

After a moment, she took a sip of the tea, warm and soothing. And then she ate a piece of pie she did not want. She fiddled with the fork and time passed. After a while, she struggled to her feet and began gathering the dishes left scattered on the long farm table.

Although the dining room and front rooms of the hotel were elegantly maintained, the kitchen was more to Deborah’s style, more like a farmhouse kitchen, like the one at the hunting house, although this one was much bigger. She should have gone back, to check on the children, but could not bear to see Sally Jane. Her mother had abandoned her to a grandmother she did not know and now that grandmother was gone. What would happen to her now? And who would tell the little girl her “g’maw” was gone? Or did she already know, told by the other children?

Deborah washed the last dessert plate and wished she had Isaac, more for his company than for his help to dry for her, as he’d done at the hunting house, a few short months ago. Could it have been only a few months ago she’d met Chance on the train?

The door from the dining room opened, and Deborah glanced over her shoulder. It was Chance. And he was holding Sally Jane who held to him as if for dear life.

Chance spoke calmly, levelly. “We finally got the fires out.”

Deborah took his cue and spoke flatly, with no inflection. “How much damage?”

“The bank has the least. Much of our effort was concentrated there. The general store can be repaired, as can the restaurant. Probably won’t take long, a few weeks, before they re-open.”

Deborah was well aware he had not mentioned the school nor the butcher shop, and she did not ask about them. After searching his eyes for a moment, she moved restlessly. “I need to send the children

home.”

“No need. Their parents came looking for them. They’re all gone except...” He inclined his head to the little girl.

Sally Jane laid her head on Chance’s shoulder. “I go home now.”

“Yes, you can go home with me,” Deborah said.

Sally Jane shook her head. “With him.” She poked her finger in Chance’s chest.

Deborah glanced at Chance and then back to Sally. “You can’t go with him, darling.”

“Perhaps she can.” Chance’s eyes looked distressed, hopeful, and pained by turns.

Deborah frowned at him. “Chance! You cannot go home with me, if that’s what you are thinking.”

“Are you still angry?” The hopeful look returned, and his breathing deepened and slowed.

Tears filled her eyes, and her lips twitched again in an effort to form words until she simply shook her head.

“Good. Preacher Grisson will be happy to marry us, if you are willing.”

“Of course, but he can’t tonight,” she choked out. She could not stop the tears from spilling down her cheeks again and grabbed the dishcloth for a handkerchief. Her weeping quieted with her exhaustion although the tears still flowed.

Chance massaged the back of his neck. “Yes. Right this minute, as a matter of fact.” He held Sally Jane with one arm and held out his free hand for Deborah.

She took his warm hand that felt so right in hers, and they went into the dining room. She was blinded by her tears and kept her head down.

Chance spoke, to Sophia, she assumed. “We’re taking her home with us. Deborah has agreed.”

Deborah heard a laugh. *Klint’s*. She swallowed hard, looked up, and blinked. The room was filled with people—Klint, Fritz and Lydia, Jake and Rebecca, even their shy sister Beth, Sheriff Vic, Preacher Grisson and Miss Trudie, Sophia, Lavendar, Molly, her husband Tom, Isaac, her grandparents, and even Miss Abby.

She searched Abby’s face, and Abby gave a simple nod, and she knew her brothers were all right, for now. Sophia offered to take Sally Jane, but she would not let go of Chance’s neck. “She can stay here with me,” Chance said. “Ready, Deborah?”

Preacher Grisson had his Bible open. “Shall we begin?”

Deborah clung to Chance’s arm as her knees weakened. This was too much, after all that had happened. Her tears flowed again.

This was never how she imagined marrying, but did the wedding

matter? Only the man beside her did.

She released Chance, and her eyes searched the crowd until she caught sight of the man who had been like a father to her. "Isaac..." Tears still flowed, but he understood her.

He came and held out his arm, and she took it. He smiled. "It's my honor to give the bride away."

Lavendar clapped. "We've always wanted a wedding here. Go to the landing and walk down the stairs."

She and Isaac did as Lavendar asked. Chance, still holding Sally, waited with Preacher Grisson. Someone handed a washcloth to Isaac.

"Give us a moment," he said to the crowd, and people turned away and gave Deborah a moment to at least wash the soot from her face.

She leaned her head closer to Isaac to whisper. "It's looks like Sally has taken a liking to Chance. Why?"

"Sometimes people just recognize each other." His warm brown eyes sparkled as he gazed into hers.

Deborah nodded and took his arm. Isaac cleared his throat, and everyone quieted. Deborah's fingers dug into Isaac's arm so tightly he winced but did not try to loosen her grip.

He led her down the steps, and then the few feet to Chance who never took his gaze from her face. Those eyes burned into her and warmed her and made her forget her weariness.

Isaac may have said something when he released her. If so, she did not hear. All she was aware of was that Chance clasped her hand again. Her fingers wrapped around his.

Her tears still blinded her, tears of happiness, as Preacher Grisson said, "We're gathered here today..."

She'd never be able to say, "I do," but maybe a nod would do the job.

Chance was frustrated. Sally Jane had not let him out of her sight the entire night. She slept between them, and when he tried to move her to her own bed, she woke and cried. He'd finally given up on getting closer to Deborah and had finally slept but awakened early. Sally Jane continued sleeping as he quietly slipped from the bed.

He thought of awakening Deborah, sneaking into another bedroom but discarded the idea. The last few days had been hell on her, and she needed her rest.

He went into the kitchen and made the coffee. The sun was up, high in the sky. He'd been dead tired, too, and overslept.

Chance got the fire started in the wood stove, made coffee, and poked around the kitchen. There was not much food around. Fritz had had his saddlebags bulging with food, probably from cleaning out the kitchen.

Chance was strangely calm for someone who had no idea what awaited—if he'd be arrested, or if Deborah would, very likely, both. All his focus was on Deborah, and he cared for nothing else—well, except for the little girl asleep in the bed by his wife.

He smiled when he thought of last night's events. Deborah's group of family and friends had all entered the hotel together, he supposed wanting to comfort each other and to speak with Deborah.

Sally Jane, who had been whining in Sophia's lap, caught sight of him and squirmed to escape her grasp. She'd run to Chance and threw her arms around his neck.

Still holding the little girl, he'd called the sheriff aside, then and there, and told her he wanted to marry Deborah immediately. Partly, it was because of Sally Jane. It had twisted his heart almost from his chest when he'd seen her, looking so forlorn, on the platform at the depot. Someone had to take her, care for her, and he wanted it to be him.

Not that he felt guilty about her grandmother's death. What were the odds that a bullet would ricochet from the school bell at the exact angle, to the exact distance to where Miss Edna stood? Probably he should have shot the man as he rode by, but he refused to assume that guilt.

It was not his fault, but that of physics, of bad luck, of something... He could not assign it to God, except perhaps God allowed it to happen. Even if it was God's doing, Heaven was simply a matter of opening a door, of crossing a bridge, going from one existence to

another. And if the Bible were to be believed, it was a place where all tears were wiped away. His belief had wavered during the War, when he'd shot his own brother, and then when his parents had disowned him, and his older brother had turned him out.

However, it had led him here, to Deborah, perhaps to Sally Jane. And if he'd learned anything, it was that life was short. His faith was weak but perhaps it would strengthen with time.

So, he had asked the sheriff, although he wasn't sure if she could have stopped him from marrying, and she'd only studied him a moment before she nodded her assent.

Deborah, Lavendar said, was in the kitchen. He'd looked around at all the folks in the hotel, all the people Deborah cared about, and knew no reason to delay their marriage. Preacher Grisson, sitting on the purple velvet settee, had agreed, and it became a matter of convincing Deborah, and that had been much easier than he anticipated. He still couldn't believe his good fortune, his wife, Deborah, whom he'd loved from the moment he'd seen her. He was content or would be if the little girl ever allowed him near Deborah.

From the way it stood now, Sally Jane was not going to let him have a moment alone with his wife, and it would take time to help her feel safe, safe enough to let him from her sight. A knock sounded at the door.

It was Calvin Meyers. "Good morning, Mr. Hale. The sheriff sent me to deliver a message." Calvin peered around Chance.

"What are you doing?" Chance asked irritably. He had not even had his first cup of coffee and wasn't up for chitchat.

Calvin smiled up at him and raised his eyebrows. "I was looking for Mrs. Hale. I heard you and Miss Deborah tied the knot."

Chance frowned at him. "She's indisposed. What does the sheriff want?"

Calvin got very still and focused on a spot on the door frame near Chance's head. "She said to inform you the circuit judge will be in the conference room at the bank at two o'clock sharp. You and Miss Deborah... I mean, Mrs. Hale are to be there." He looked down at his boots when he spoke his next words. "Said if she had to come after you, you'd be in a sorry mess."

Chance gritted his teeth and spoke through a clenched jaw. "Tell the sheriff we will be there."

He closed the door in Calvin's face and then felt a little ashamed. It wasn't Calvin's fault. He was only the messenger.

Chance grimaced. Still, that boy had come to ogle Deborah. Chance grimaced and then laughed at his jealousy of the youngster.

Deborah appeared in the doorway, and Sally Jane pushed past her and made a beeline to Chance.

"You left me," the little girl accused.

"Look," Chance said without picking her up. "I can't carry you with me everywhere I go."

Her bottom lip trembled, and Deborah frowned at him and made a motion with the back of her hands.

He obeyed his wife and picked the little girl up and took a seat at the table. "Coffee's on the stove, Deborah."

"I'll pour us a cup." She gave a big yawn. "Who was that at the door?"

"Calvin. He had a message from the sheriff. The judge wants us to meet in the conference room of the bank at two today."

"Today? But the bank burned, and we need to help clean up." She set his coffee down in front of him and took a seat across from him, cradling her own cup.

He tried not to look directly at his wife. Even straight out of bed, with tiredness showing in her eyes from the day before, she was the loveliest woman he'd ever seen. He spoke to the wall instead. "Only the front of the lobby burned. The conference room is still intact."

"Thank goodness for that. Father spent a fortune on the table and chairs. Hired a craftsman from southeast Texas to handmake the furniture." His eyes were drawn to her as she absently wrapped a curl around a finger.

Chance nodded, not really interested in furniture, especially not with his new wife sitting across the table from him. He inclined his head to touch the top of Sally Jane's. "What are we going to do with her?"

"I hungry," Sally Jane said.

Chance stood with her in his arms. "Sit with Miss Deborah, and I'll make breakfast."

Sally Jane kicked, locked her legs, and refused to bend her knees. "No."

Chance frowned at Deborah who got to her feet. "Sally, Chance can't hold you all the time."

"Why?"

"He has other things he needs to do." Her eyes met his, and she smiled.

Her silky skin begged for his hand, but Sally Jane kicked at Deborah, and her hold tightened around his neck. Chance loosened her arms, but to little avail. He looked to his wife for help.

She shrugged. "I don't think we have any food in the house. Why don't we go to Molly's?"

Chance smiled. "I'm sure she's not open today, but it shouldn't take Tom and Molly long to get the restaurant up and running. How about the hotel?"

Deborah nodded. "All right. We'll be going by the doctor's office, and I can stop to check on Curt and Karl."

Chance nodded, and he prayed they'd find them still among the living. And then he reconsidered his prayer. Karl had suffered a gut wound, and it wasn't very likely he'd survive. Such a death was agonizing—he'd seen enough of them during the War to know.

His wife, Sally Jane, the meeting with the judge, the damage to the town, and Deborah's brothers on the brink of death—it all came crashing down. Pressure from all directions squeezed him, pressed so that he had to do something. He paced the floor with Sally Jane in his arms.

"What's wrong?" Deborah asked him.

"Nothing and everything."

"You mean the judge? I don't think we'll go to prison... Do you? I mean the money was not stolen..." Her face turned up to his, and she searched his eyes.

"Yes, but you and Lydia broke us out of jail. We led the sheriff on a merry race, leaving the town unprotected from that gang." Tightness entered his chest and threatened to choke him.

"You think Sheriff Vic could have stopped the gang from—" She broke off and looked at Sally Jane as if she'd thought better of what she planned to say.

Chance shrugged. "Who can say? I don't mean to worry you..."

A smile spread across her face. "Funny, but I'm not worried. I suppose so much has happened that whatever our fate, it seems insignificant. Do you feel that way?"

"Yes." He loosened Sally Jane's arms and held them to the side as he bent to plant a kiss on his wife's warm lips.

Her eyes darkened. A flicker of excitement passed through her eyes. "If prison awaits us, perhaps we need to redeem the time while we can."

His breathing deepened as ease and excitement eased in his stomach. "We have a slight problem."

Deborah tilted her head. "When we stop to check on my brothers, I'll talk to Abby. She has a way with children."

He certainly hoped so, but he wasn't sure. "Go get ready."

"Are you in a hurry?" Her eyes sparkled, teasing him.

"As a matter of fact, I am." He freed a hand and reached out to her, capturing and holding her hand against his cheek.

And she pulled away, laughed, and ran from the room. "I'll be ready faster than you can say Jack Robinson," she called over her shoulder.

Deborah brushed away her irritation. It wasn't Sally Jane's fault.

Who could blame her after all she'd been through? Too bad the little girl latched onto Chance with such ferocity that it made it impossible for Deborah to get close to her own husband.

The short time it had taken Chance to bathe and dress had turned to pure agony for Deborah. Sally Jane's pouts had turned to tears and then to screams before Chance emerged. He offered an apology, but he had no need. He'd taken no more than ten minutes.

After they checked on Curt and Karl, and finding them unchanged from the day before, she'd asked Abby for help, as she had promised Chance. All Abby told her was to have patience. Even Mathew's son Ethan could not entice Sally Jane from Chance's lap nor could the temptation of sweets at the hotel. Sally Jane stuck to Chance like a tick.

They stayed at the hotel, in the lobby, whiling away the time, hoping to distract the little girl. Nothing worked. She'd fallen asleep in Chance's arms.

The weather had warmed, and they found a sunny spot on the veranda of the hotel and waited. Deborah looked at the sleeping girl in Chance's arms. Her irritation must have shown.

His face held a tender expression. "She'll adjust, Deborah."

"I suppose. Eventually." Deborah laughed, not without some bitterness. By the time Sally adjusted, they might both be serving prison sentences.

"Maybe we need to search for her mother." He pressed his lips together and looked away as if it had pained him to say it.

Deborah raised her eyebrows. "I thought we were going to?"

He shot her a quick glance. "Sophia made it sound as if her mother abandoned her. I see no need if that is the case."

"The woman is still her mother, and we need to find her. And even if she does not want her, it's possible Miss Edna had other family." Not that she didn't want Sally to stay with them. Her heart ached for the young girl.

Chance's words, when he spoke, were innocuous, but his eyes were guarded. "What time is it?"

"Quarter till. I suppose we can walk toward the bank." The weather was warmer than it had been for the past few days, although still cool.

The sun shone brightly, but the smell of smoke still hung heavily in

the air. The walk depressed her, and the brightness of the day brought home the amount of destruction. The burnt front of the bank affected her the most, her father's pride and joy. Deborah was sure Fritz or Klint had taken measures to secure the gold in the jars. If she'd opened that jar of marmalade, how different might things have turned out? But it was too late now. The past was immutable.

To drive the dreary thoughts away, she turned to Chance. "Do you want me to carry her?"

Chance had to be tired from carrying her around all day. Sally slept peacefully and might not awaken if Chance placed her in her arms.

He shook his head, his face grim. "I can manage."

They walked down Main Street and saw no one about. Folks were probably tired from the events of the day before and were resting. The town was eerily quiet, quieter than Deborah ever remembered.

Thomas Reed, one of the few people on the street, stood outside of Molly's Restaurant, surveying the damage.

"Do you need any help?" Chance asked.

Deborah did not understand why. There was very little he could do with the little girl in his arms.

"No. The supplies disappeared quickly from what was left of the general store. Some men have gone over to Woodland to bring back more."

That explained some of the quietness, but surely not everyone had gone.

Thomas looked to the sleeping child and then raised his glance to Chance. "She's a pretty little thing. A shame about Miss Edna."

Chance gave a nod but did not answer.

Deborah spoke, her head slightly bowed, afraid Sally might awaken. "It certainly is. Please give Molly my regards."

She raised a hand in good-bye, and they turned to walk up North Main Street. Her heart ached. The Brokkens needed to help out the reparations of the town. She'd speak to Fritz when she saw him.

The butcher shop had burned to the ground, and Missy sat in front of where her father's shop used to stand.

Deborah smiled a tentative greeting.

"Are you going to the bank?" Missy asked them.

Deborah nodded.

"I'll walk with you." Missy stood and brushed the dirt from her dress. "Sheriff Vic is already there. I'm staying with her," she confided.

"For how long?" Chance asked.

"I will stay for my father's funeral. I have family back East, and Sheriff Vic will telegraph them after she ... finishes at the bank."

Deborah pressed her lips together, surprised that the girl seemed so little affected by the burning of the shop and the death of her father, although she'd heard the butcher had been a hard man with little patience.

Missy's eyes were red-rimmed. Perhaps she was one of those who hid their emotions. "Did you say you were staying with the sheriff?" Deborah asked.

"I had nowhere else to go. I suppose I could have stayed at the hotel, but I'd rather stay with the sheriff."

They reached the bank, and Missy held out her arms. "If you'd like, I'll keep Sally with me."

Chance frowned at her and shook his head. "She's no trouble. I'll hold her."

Deborah was not so sure. If she awakened, she'd probably make a fuss. And what would the judge think? But a look at Chance made her reconsider her words she almost spoke aloud. If they were lucky, she'd sleep through the meeting.

The smell of smoke was heavy throughout the town, but Deborah choked with more than the smoke when she entered through the front of the bank. Some smoke particles had not yet settled and swirled as they passed. Luckily, the cuckoo clock had not burned.

She looked to Chance for help and sighed. Klint or Fritz would take it down for her, and she'd make sure her grandfather's clock was protected until the bank was repaired. At least, someone had swept out the heavy soot. Chance called her name and cocked his head at the door. She opened the conference room door for him.

The judge waited with the sheriff, their heads bent together over a sheaf of papers. When they entered, Judge Davis gave a short nod, and they took a seat.

The judge ignored them and instead read the papers he held in his hand.

The sheriff cleared her throat, cast a glance at the judge, who remained engrossed in reading, and then slid an envelope across the table to Chance. "Please do not open it until this is over."

Chance's forehead furrowed. "What is this?"

"For once, do as I say and ask no questions." The sheriff leaned back and crossed her arms.

Chance shot Deborah a look. She shrugged. He picked up the envelope and folded it to fit into his pocket, shifting Sally so he could do so.

Fritz, Lydia, and Klint joined them within a few minutes, and the sheriff nodded at the judge to begin.

Judge Davis took his gavel and struck the table. Deborah winced, afraid he'd left a mark on the wood. He shuffled the papers in front of

him while he spoke. "This is a preliminary hearing to determine how we are to proceed. Sheriff English has informed me of extenuating circumstances and has provided me with a detailed report of all that has occurred."

He looked around the table, studying each of them in turn. Deborah kept her hands folded in her lap, as a lady should. She tilted her chin up when the judge's gaze landed on her.

He went back to shuffling the papers. "I have to say that this is confusing, to say the least. Let me see if I have this straight. The bank's money was converted to gold and stored in jars of orange marmalade?"

Fritz spoke, his voice clear and strong. "Yes, sir."

"Craziest thing I've ever heard. However, if the gold never left the bank, I suppose no bank robbery occurred."

Fritz kept his face smooth, but Deborah, who knew her brother so well, saw the relief. Lydia could not contain her elation and grabbed Fritz's hand and let out a small squeal, which the judge squelched with one look.

"However, that does not excuse the behavior of all of you gathered here. A jailbreak occurred, resulting in considerable damage that you are responsible for."

Fritz again spoke. "Yes, sir. We take full responsibility and will reimburse the town. As a matter of fact, we will make improvements to the jail, modernize it."

Chance shot Deborah's brother a look. Deborah bit her lip, hoping Chance would not speak, but he did. "Sorry, Judge Davis, may I interrupt?"

The judge nodded his assent.

"I wish to clarify exactly what my brother-in-law means by 'we.'" Chance's gaze locked with Fritz's.

Deborah sighed. Would they never learn to get along?

Fritz tilted his head. "We, of course, means the Brokken family."

"Since Deborah is no longer a Brokken, that does not include her." Chance dropped his gaze to the child who continued to sleep in his arms.

"We can discuss the details later," Fritz said, with obvious irritation.

A muscle in Chance's jaw twitched, but he did not reply.

The judge gave a nod to Fritz. "If that is resolved, I will continue. Even if you make reparations, you still broke out of jail, and these two young ladies..." The judge consulted one of the papers in front of him. "Lydia Walsh and Deborah Brokken..."

Chance's head snapped up. "Deborah Hale."

The judge glared at him before he continued. "These two young

ladies aided in the jailbreak.” He placed the papers in front of him and straightened them. “Again, there were extenuating circumstances. Curt and Karl Brokken were being held in a Mexican prison?”

Fritz nodded. “Yes, sir.” Her brother was immaculately dressed, his manner deferential and yet not subservient.

For what good it did him. The judge nailed him with a stare. “Why not inform the sheriff? She would have taken the necessary steps to have freed these men.”

Sheriff Vic joined the judge in glaring at Fritz although she did not speak.

“Again, I will take full responsibility for that.” Fritz’s eyes remained serious.

Chance raised his head to frown at him. Deborah knew what her husband thought. *It was Fritz’s responsibility*, and her brother made it sound as if he was magnanimous in accepting it.

Fritz shot Chance a look before turning back to the judge. “As you undoubtedly heard, Emperor Maximilian was executed in June of this year. I felt, perhaps wrongly, that the state of Texas would not want to be involved in such a volatile situation. I deeply regret I did not explore all options. However, time was of the essence.”

The judge studied him for many long seconds and shook his head. “You’re a well-spoken young man but I fear you have behaved foolishly, criminally, in fact. However, we have one last extenuating circumstance—you, Mr. Caper, and Mr. Hale contributed to...”

Chance held up a hand.

The judge sighed deeply and tilted his head. “Yes, Mr. Hale?”

“You are forgetting Miss Brokken... I mean, my wife, Mrs. Chance Hale.”

The judge shook his head, perused the papers again, and nodded. “I see she also contributed to saving the town from further damage.” He gave her a nod, and Chance gave her a tight-lipped smile.

Sheriff Vic spoke for the first time. “Yes, they all behaved gallantly. However, if I had not been out chasing them, with most of the men of the town as my posse, perhaps we would have prevented this before it happened. And, but for the Brokkens, would we be in this situation?”

Fritz and Deborah exchanged a look. Sheriff Vic, for all intents and purposes, seemed bent on jailing at least one of them.

The judge shook his head slowly. “The burning of the town was unfortunate, but I believe you underestimate the Andrews Gang. They have burned entire towns, killed dozens, carried off—” He waved a hand as if reconsidering what he was about to say before continuing. “There’s no way of knowing what the outcome would have been. These three young men, whom I understand were all sharpshooters during the War, managed to kill more members of the Andrews Gang

than any Texas lawmen in the past five years—not that I don't have the greatest respect for those who serve the great state of Texas.”

Sheriff Vic bowed her head in acquiesce.

“And while it was the gold belonging to the Brokkens that the gang sought, I can scarcely blame them for the actions of these outlaws.”

The judge drummed his fingers on the table and again sighed heavily, appearing perplexed.

“I agree with you, Judge. However, I no longer have a jail, two buildings burned completely to the ground, and others were heavily damaged.” The sheriff's glare landed squarely on Fritz.

Fritz moved uneasily in his seat. “The Brokkens, of course, will extend credit to those impacted...”

“Or perhaps more,” Deborah said. “We are willing to help the town in whatever way we can.”

Sheriff Vic gave her an appreciative nod.

The judge rapped a knuckle to bring attention back to him. “The sticking point is the jailbreak. I cannot condone such activity by simply dismissing it.” Each word he spoke was articulated, neatly separated, so there could be no mistaking his intention.

His gaze traveled around the room as if he assessed them individually. “The sheriff has recommended a punishment. She suggests all five of you spend a year in making amends to this community, and that is in addition to paying for all damages you have incurred. I tend to agree with her recommendation. I see no need why we must take this to trial.”

Deborah reached a hand blindly to Chance, holding to his sleeve since his arms were still holding Sally Jane.

The judge finally seemed satisfied and nodded. “For one full year, you are to serve this town and community, in any way the sheriff feels necessary. In addition, full reparations must be made for all damages by March fifteenth of next year. If Sheriff English has nothing more to add, you are dismissed.”

He banged his gavel again although Deborah no longer cared if he damaged the wood. No one would be going to prison. She and Lydia found each other and hugged. The men shook hands with the judge, the sheriff, and each other, except for Chance, who still held the sleeping Sally Jane.

Chance hoped Sally would sleep when they arrived home, but her long nap in his arms had her squirming to get down as soon as they walked in the door. He should have been happy, with the light sentence imposed by the judge, but it was still a stain, a blemish on his name.

In addition, obstacles stood in his way before he achieved complete happiness. Somehow, somehow, from the moment he'd pulled Sally's hand away from Miss Edna, she'd become his daughter. Deborah said they'd find her mother and that frightened Chance. He'd not rest easy until the mother was found and questioned.

Deborah took Sally's hand, against her wishes, and led her out back, to the outhouse. Chance fired up the stove to warm the coffee still in the pot and took a seat at the table.

Deborah returned looking as if she'd wrestled a bear. Sally made a beeline to him. This time, although she attempted to climb into his lap, he did not pick her up. He stroked her long, blonde hair and worked at some of the tangles.

Deborah had attempted to brush it that morning, but Sally would have none of that. Chance knew things could not continue like this, that the little girl would be spoiled, but his heart would not allow him to show his irritability—not yet, not ever, although discipline was needed. That could wait until things became more settled. Who knew what she may have had to endure in her short life before she ever arrived in Brokken?

Still, tonight he'd get her to sleep in her own bed—somehow, somehow. He glanced up to see Deborah watching him.

“Chance...”

A knock sounded on the door, and irritability crossed Deborah's face. She sighed heavily when Sheriff Vic entered with Missy.

Without a preliminary greeting, she glared at Chance who had not risen from his seat. Sally Jane still leaned against him.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

He tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“Men!” she murmured. “Did you read the letter I gave you?”

He'd forgotten all about it. While he pulled it out of his pocket, after moving Sally out of his way, Deborah offered to take the sheriff and Missy's coats.

Sheriff Vic shook her head. “We're not staying.”

Chance read through the letter quickly and puckered his forehead,

not sure what to make of it. He looked to the sheriff and attempted to speak, but she held up a hand.

“We are not discussing this. Missy has been staying with Miss Edna and has helped care for Sally.” She touched the shoulder of the girl at her side.

Missy took the cue, stepped forward, and knelt. “Hey, Sally Jane. Remember me?”

Sally Jane had laid her head against Chance’s leg. She now straightened and smiled. Missy motioned for her. Chance and Deborah exchanged a glance, and Chance held his breath. He suspected Deborah did also.

Sally ran to the girl and threw her arms around her neck.

Sheriff Vic looked to Chance. “If you’d read the letter, you would have known without me telling you. Now, we’re taking her.”

Chance’s heart choked him. “No. I mean, you can make inquiries, but Sally needs to stay with us.”

Sheriff Vic smiled and then frowned. “Silly man. Didn’t you just read the letter?”

Chance glanced at the letter again, and his forehead smoothed. “Oh.”

“Follow the instructions.” She gave him another glare.

Missy stood and picked up Sally and spoke to her. “Do you want to go with me? We’ll play your favorite game.”

“Ride the horsey down to town?” Sally asked, and Missy nodded.

Chance feared for Sally, wanted to keep her close, to keep an eye on her, but the relief of having another person to share the load lightened his heart.

He opened his mouth to speak, but again, the sheriff held up a hand. “If we need you, we know where you are. We’ll try not to need you.”

Chance frowned and moved closer to the sheriff, determined to say at least one more thing. “And are you going to make inquiries as to the girl’s family?” he asked quietly.

“Yes. It’s the right thing to do.” Her eyes held compassion for him.

Chance nodded although his heart sank to the pit of his stomach.

“Missy and I gathered Sally’s things from Miss Edna’s house, as few as they were.” She stepped closer to Chance, and to his surprise, wrapped her arms around him.

He held to her, as if she was a raft and him a sinking sailor. It was she who pulled away, and tears stood in her eyes before she averted her face. “Let’s go, Missy.”

Chance pressed a kiss to Sally’s forehead, and Deborah saw them out. Chance went to stand by the window, to watch them pass by on the sidewalk, his arms aching with emptiness. The sheriff and Sally

both turned their heads, spotted him, and waved happily. He was glad the window obscured him, and that they could not see the tears that fell.

He went to the bedroom and poured water in the basin, to wash his face before Deborah came back. He looked up to see her watching him.

A slow smile formed on her face. "Alone at last." She inched closer to him.

He ignored her, opened the chifforobe, and pulled out two bags. "Pack your bags."

She raised her eyebrows. "What? But we're alone. Finally." She raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck.

He untangled himself and smiled at her. "Yes, but the letter contains instructions from Sheriff Vic. We have to pack."

"For what?"

His grin widened. "Trust me."

"Trust you? That means trusting the sheriff after she tried to get Fritz sent to prison! I can't believe Vic would do that to him." Deborah was indignant.

Chance wasn't so sure Fritz didn't deserve some jail time, but now was not the time to argue.

The few clothes he had, he threw into the bag and turned to Deborah who still watched him with a puzzled expression. "I need to rent a buggy from the livery. I'll be back to pick you up. Be ready."

"Where are we going?"

He tilted her head to give her a gentle kiss. "I don't think you'll be disappointed." He smiled again and left.



CHANCE DID AS THE LETTER instructed, arriving at the hunting house at seven o'clock on the dot. He'd taken a long route in order to arrive at the exact time.

Deborah, of course, knew where they headed when they turned on the road leading to the cabin.

She squeezed his arm. "I've told you, haven't I, that this is where I want to live?"

Chance nodded. She'd mentioned it more than once.

"My brothers may not want to give it up. It's where they came to hunt and fish whenever they could."

"Who knows?" A smile played on his lips that he could not hide, but the darkness obscured it, he hoped.

Deborah gasped. "Someone is here. I thought we were going to be alone." She sighed heavily.

Two other buggies were pulled to the side of the house, and a

wagon was at the front, the horses still in harness.

Chance jumped from the buggy and came around to help Deborah down. Calvin came from around the side of the house to meet them, his chest puffed out.

"I'm to take care of your horse for you," he said.

Chance suppressed a laugh. "Thank you."

Deborah and Chance walked up the steps, and both faced the door. He gave a sharp rap and put out his hand to open it.

Deborah grabbed his arm. "Wait. Whoever is in there may not want us to barge in."

"It's what the letter instructed," he said and pushed the door open.

A fire burned in the fireplace. The cabin's warmth welcomed them after the cold ride. Candles were lit and sat on the table loaded with food. Miss Abby smiled at them and removed her apron.

"I was just leaving." She hugged Deborah and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Chance tried to speak but a lump in his throat would not let the words pass.

Abby hugged him and then held him at arm's length. "The food is courtesy of Molly and Tom, although the town pitched in. Everyone else has left, gone out the back."

She went to the front, her hand on the door, and then she turned her head. "And don't worry. I'm taking Calvin with me." She laughed and was gone.

Deborah wiped away the tears and sniffled. "Why would the town do this for us, after all the trouble we caused?"

Chance shrugged his shoulders and attempted to master the emotions swirling through him. Deborah moved around the cabin and emitted soft cries as she encountered each surprise.

She went into the bedroom and called out. "They even filled the tub! The water is perfect." She came back to Chance, holding a silky gown against her. "This was laid out on the bed." She glanced at him through her lashes.

He felt the silk fabric and smiled. "Someone must like me."

Deborah laughed and slapped his hand away. "The note says it's from Vic. Maybe I misjudged her—she's always been kind to me."

He nodded his agreement and gave his wife a grin. "Go. Everything is prepared for you. I'll be waiting."

She smiled shyly, her cheeks pink, and left.

Chance went to the table, and his stomach growled. He buttered a roll and ate it and then noticed a card propped up in the center of the table.

He hesitated, wondering if he should wait for Deborah to read it, but his curiosity got the best of him. The outside of the card had

drawings, made by children. Inside it read,

Mr. Hale,

You have brought us from the brink of the abyss by your gallant efforts. We cannot adequately convey our appreciation in words.

Our children were saved by your actions, and it will never be forgotten. Nothing we can say or do will ever repay you, but we hope to continue to show our appreciation daily.

The town of Brokken remains unbroken due to your efforts. With God's help, it will continue that way.

Sincerely and with our deepest gratitude,

The Citizens of Brokken

Chance was deeply touched and traced his fingers over the drawings on the front. Deborah was not mentioned or Fritz or Klint. Perhaps there was another card for Deborah, but he did not see one. He decided he'd wait to show it to her later, not sure what her reaction might be. They had the rest of their lives to talk of it.



DEBORAH CAME FROM THE bedroom, and slid her hands down the silk gown, enjoying its smoothness. Chance moved toward her, his face glowing. He took her in his arms, and her warm lips found his. He trailed kisses down her neck until she gasped and shook.

She didn't want him to stop but could not wait to tell him what else she had discovered. She put up a hand to his chest. "Wait."

"For what?" he mumbled, still kissing her.

She pushed him back, and he stopped, his eyes still smoldering.

"A copy of father's will and a deed were on the table next to the bed."

"A deed to this house?" He did not sound surprised.

"Yes. Father's will left it to me. I don't know why." She still could not believe it and searched Chance's eyes as if he could convince her all of this was real.

Chance sobered. "Your father is now known to be deceased. More than likely, the house became yours upon marriage, and Fritz must have brought the deed over, knowing we were coming here. Besides, you are a Brokken, and you deserve it. I think you love this place

more than your brothers ever could have.” His rich voice never failed to comfort her.

Her chest rose and fell with a sigh of happiness, and she nestled in his arms. But she didn’t stay that way long. Chance scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom. The sheets were sweet smelling, and she breathed deeply.

As contentment washed over her, she raised her arms to her husband. And never had she felt so wanted, so at home, or so loved.



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Abigail lives in South Alabama with her husband, five dogs and two cats, near where her ancestors scratched a living from the ground. She is a righter of wrongs, including her own, and a peacemaker, a servant, a defender. A writer. You can connect with Abigail at the following links:

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